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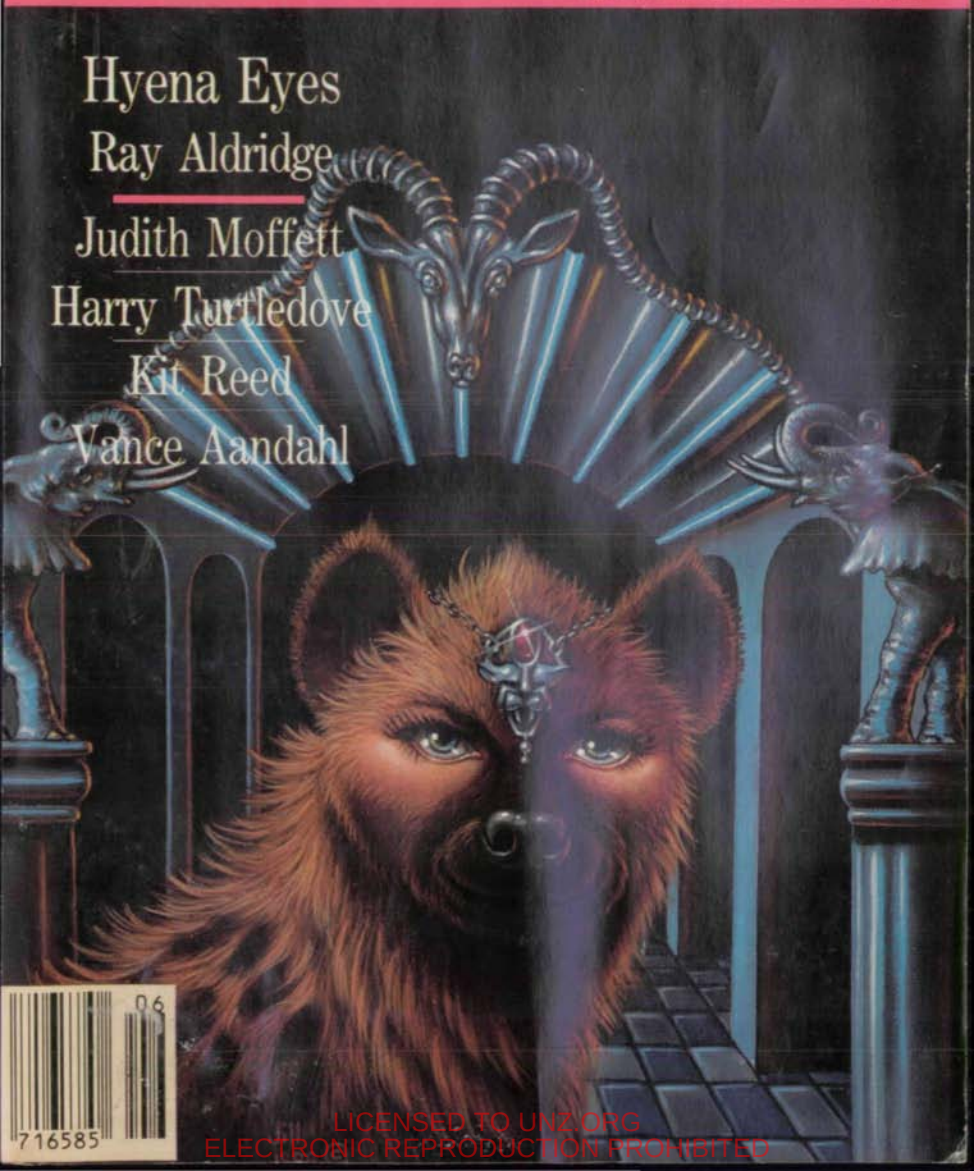

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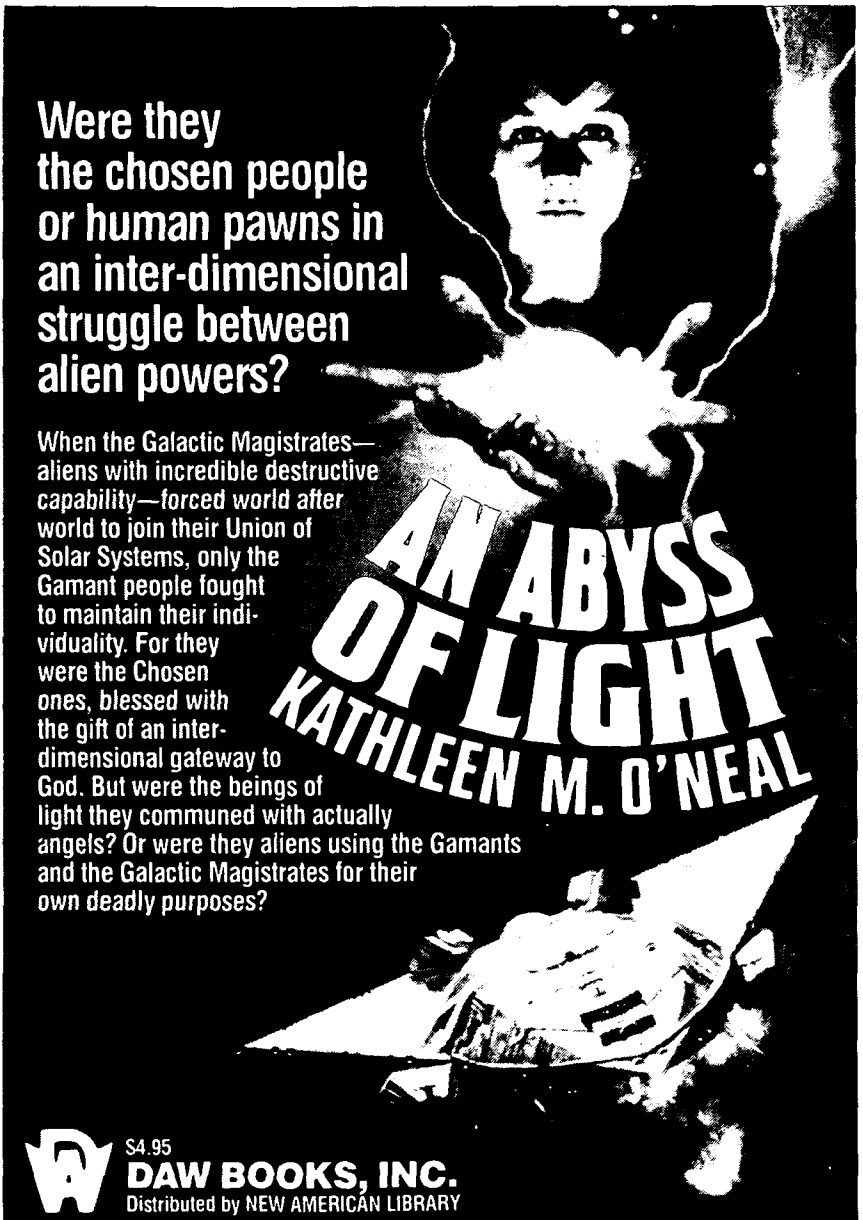
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THE MAGAZINE OF
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JUNE • 41st Year of Publication

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Judith Moffett's last story here was the Christmas fantasy "I, Said the Cow," (January 1990). Her new story is science fiction, and it concerns the powerful aliens known as Hefn, who have given the people of Earth a Directive and only nine years to meet it . . .

FINAL *TOMTE*

By Judith Moffett

I

THEY RODE UP THE ESCALATOR from the subway and stepped blinking into the bright Nordic sunlight. Or rather, the young man blinked; his odd-looking companion opaqued the inner lid of his eyes against the glare.

"We could walk from here," Anders Eklund suggested uncertainly. "It's rather a pleasant walk, along a shady street and over the Field itself. Or, if you prefer, we can take a taxi most of the way." He addressed his companion by the formal Swedish word for "you" — *Ni* — which had recently come back into vogue after all but disappearing from the language during the late twentieth century. Anyone listening would have known at once that the two were mere acquaintances, not friends.

"Oh, a walk sounds fine," the Hefn replied in a deep, cheerful voice. The top of his head came even with Anders's shoulder. He wore trousers and shoes and a shirt, but all the parts of his body not concealed beneath

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clothing were covered with a grayish fur, and his long gray beard hung below his belt.

The two set off together down the center of the busy handsome thoroughfare called Valhallavagen, where a sandy footpath and an avenue of tall linden trees divided the two lanes of traffic. Between the lindens, Anders walked stiffly, the Hefn energetically; he had no difficulty keeping up with the long-legged man. He looked about him with an air of intense and genial curiosity at the cars, the post office, the small shops, his fellow pedestrians. In the capital of any other country he would have created a sensation, but those Stockholmers who sighted and recognized the Hefn kept their composure and scarcely looked, let alone gawked, at him. Pomphrey, by contrast, peered from beneath shaggy brows at every person he passed. He appeared to be enjoying himself thoroughly, while Anders grew more miserably self-conscious with every block, and regretted a dozen times the taxi they might have been concealed within.

Eventually the street opened upon an enormous sloping field, carpeted with tall brown grasses of late summer, and dotted with huge gray glacial boulders. "Here we are. This is Gardet," Anders said with relief, stating the obvious. "The Girl Scouts are camped in the trees near Kaknastornet — the radio tower, you know," pointing at a distant structure that soared above the broad horizontal like a bristly rocket. "We might have lunch up there later if you like — there are tremendous views of Djurgarden and the canal, and the surrounding terrain."

His voice faltered suddenly as he thought, too late, of the lunchtime crowds of summer in the tower restaurant; but Pomphrey only said pleasantly, "I doubt there'll be time for lunch, and I've already seen the view. Let's wait and see what develops, shall we?"

Anders kicked himself mentally; what was he doing, spouting off like a tourist guide, when he knew perfectly well that the Hefn had been in town for nearly two months already? He looked away to hide his hot face, and led the way along a track beaten through the grass, one leading in the general direction of the tower.

After several weeks of stupefying heat, many Stockholmers were taking advantage of the wonderful weather to let their dogs or children run, or to lie in the sun, disregarding their knowledge of the danger from ultraviolet radiation — even here in Scandinavia — just as many of them were also disregarding what they knew about the dangers of tobacco.

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There appeared, in fact, to be a general engagement in denial; certainly, one would never guess to look at these people how profoundly events of the past year had affected the terms of their existence on the planet or their future lives. This denial could not last. But while it did, the Stockholmers would go doggedly on in pursuit of their customary pleasures.

In the distance, several people moved on horseback along one or another of the tracks through the grass. Pomphrey gazed with great interest at these, and the topless sunbathers and shrill, white-headed children; and even Anders relaxed somewhat in the relative informality of the Field. More people stared openly at Pomphrey here than in the subway or the streets; several even said "*Hej!*" as he went by, and whenever that happened, the Hefn returned the greeting cheerily. A number of others recoiled, averted their eyes, made inaudible comments to their companions; these he ignored.

Anders was sweating by the time they neared the shade of the birches at the top of the field. "Look over there," he couldn't help saying, pointing to a miniaturized palace to their left, partly screened by trees. "Did you know that the kings of Sweden used to review their troops from that vantage? Gardet was a parade ground before it was a recreational resource for the citizens of Stockholm."

"Stockholm is a very nice city," said Pomphrey agreeably, without actually answering him. "Anywhere else, this whole tract of ground would have been developed long since, and then all these people would have no place to walk their dogs on a beautiful Sunday afternoon."

Anders regarded this as a self-evident truth requiring neither thanks nor reply. All the same, he was gratified. "The Scouts should be somewhere around here. It isn't usual for camping to be allowed. This group has special permission, and the protection of the American Embassy — I believe they send a couple of Marines up here to guard the site at night, and when the girls are away. Don't ask me why *these* girls get special treatment."

"I wasn't going to."

Anders glanced quickly at Pomphrey; was this a too-literal reading of his remark? Or was the Hefn being sarcastic, making fun of him? He flushed furiously again at this possibility; but at that moment Pomphrey said, "I think I smell woodsmoke. Would they be permitted to build a fire up here?"

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"I don't know. Perhaps. There's plenty of dead wood to pick up if they were."

Just after that, they struck a Jeep road through the birches and turned right, in the direction of the now-invisible tower. A few minutes' walking brought them to their goal: six wall tents, two Johnnies-on-the-Spot, a fire circle, and twenty American teenagers absorbed in making sandwiches, gathering firewood, or fussing with a pot set over the flames.

All these activities stopped when Anders and Pomphrey hove into view. Unlike the ordinary Swedes, these kids stared at the Hefn with all their might; almost certainly, none of them had ever seen a Hefn before except on TV. Nobody said anything, but after a moment, one of them went into a tent and came out again followed by a young woman —Anders guessed she might be several years older than himself, and stood with as much height and dignity as he could, for he thought her attractive.

The woman approached the two visitors and addressed them in English: "Hello. You're from the Swedish Institute, right? I'm Brenda Hollis; I'm the one who called this morning."

"Anders Eklund," said Anders, offering his hand. "And this is, ah, Pomphrey. The Hefn Observer to the Swedish Government."

Brenda shook hands with Anders in a perfunctory way, but her eyes were all for the Hefn, who held out his own hand in an obvious show of courtesy — adopting the customs of the barbarians, Anders thought with irritation, observing that Brenda held on to Pomphrey's hairy-backed hand noticeably longer than she had held his own. "Your name is *Pomphrey*?" she asked. "It isn't really, is it?"

"It *is* really. Or as near as makes no difference," the Hefn replied, with that elusive *semblance* of smiling and twinkling that they all had, which was no true human expression at all if you looked carefully. "My real name, or part of it, actually is" — and he made a noise that did in fact sound a lot like "Pomphrey."

"Come and sit down," said Brenda. "I'm afraid all I can offer are these big stones to sit on, but we find they do very well. Go on, kids — finish putting lunch together, and go ahead and eat it when it's ready if I'm still tied up," she added to the Girl Scouts, who were watching the visitors with their tongues all but hanging out, and whispering to one another. As they began to move, reluctantly, Brenda said, "They don't mean to be rude; it's quite a thrill for them to see a Hefn close to. Please don't be offended."

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Her directness made Anders cringe, but Pomphrey said, "I'm not a bit offended. It's a good thing for youngsters to be interested in what's strange to them. If they were afraid, instead of curious, that might make them dangerous, and *that* would be offensive, perhaps." His English was much better than Anders's, and even better than his Swedish — which was very good — and he had, of course, no "foreign" accent in either language. No Hefn did.

Brenda hoisted herself onto a granite boulder and waited for her visitors to seat themselves. She was as slender as one of her charges, and dressed like them in jeans and joggers and a green polo shirt with a gold trefoil on the left breast. "I'll tell you both what I told Mr. Hildeman on the phone, only in more detail, and let you decide whether it was worth your while to come all the way out here for the information."

Pomphrey had scrambled nimbly onto the rock of his choice, despite his short legs. He nodded, twinkling.

"We'll tape your story, if you don't object." Anders produced a tiny, expensive tape recorder from his shoulder bag, set it on the rock beside him, pressed buttons. "The microphone is very sensitive; it will pick you up easily. Now. Begin."

"This is Brenda Hollis, speaking from my campsite on Gardet near the Kaknas radio tower, outside Stockholm, and the date is August 14, 2012. With me are Anders Eklund of Svenska Institutet, and the Hefn Observer Pomphrey.

"I'm the leader of a Cadette Girl Scout troop from Allentown, Pennsylvania. My brother, Victor Hollis, who is cultural attaché at the American Embassy, arranged for us to camp here for a week. Through the Swedish Institute, he also arranged a number of excursions and entertainments for us, including an evening with the folklorist and storyteller Gunnar Lundqvist. Mr. Lundqvist came out to our campsite last evening, with Elisabeth Hall of the Institute. The Scouts cooked dinner for themselves and the two guests, and then we all sat around the campfire while Mr. Lundqvist told stories for, oh, an hour and a half or thereabouts.

"I ought to say that Mr. Lundqvist had brought a bottle of snaps, from which he fortified himself from time to time throughout the evening. He was certainly a little drunk the whole time, though I doubt that any, or many, of the kids noticed — he was subtle about it, and didn't slur his speech or drop things or stagger or anything like that."

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Anders stopped his recorder. "This is a very serious accusation, Miss Hollis, that the Swedish Institute would send a drunken storyteller to a visiting group of American Girl Scouts," he said, looking severely at Brenda.

"I know. Elisabeth was very embarrassed, and apologized afterward before taking him away — she said he had proved 'unreliable' in that way before, but not for quite a while, and she certainly would recommend against his ever being employed by the Institute again. But drunk or sober, he was a wonderful storyteller, the kids loved him. Shall I go on?"

Anders, looking sour as well as flushed, started the recorder again.

"He was a very good storyteller," Brenda repeated. "He talked about trolls and water sprites as if he'd known them personally. He'd lived for some years in America as a young man, he said, and spoke excellent English, of a pretty unvarnished sort, and the kids just gobbled him up.

"The last story he told, while he was the most drunk he ever got, was about a *tomte*. Tom-th, is that how you say it? Yes? Well, he told that one as if he actually *had* known a — a *tomte* as a boy on his father's farm in southern Sweden. I didn't think of it at the time — I was too absorbed in the story, and also too nervous that he would get just a little bit more drunk and become obvious — but this morning I realized what he might have been saying, and that's why I called."

From the gathered Scouts at that moment, there suddenly arose the sound of singing:

Noontime is here,
The board is spread—
Thanks be to God
Who gives us bread.

Brenda smiled. "Lunch must be ready, finally. It still takes them a solid hour to make three dozen sandwiches and heat a kettle of soup. Well, anyway: Mr. Lundqvist said that when he was a boy, there was a *tomte* living on his father's farm. He lived in the barn, and helped with the planting and harvesting and — and seed cleaning, and whatever else they used to do on the farms here, sixty or seventy years ago. He did all this during the night, so that nobody ever saw him at work. Mr. Lundqvist said his parents and uncles and the hired hands — all the adults there — knew

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perfectly well about the *tomte*, but never spoke of him; and when *he* used to try to talk about him, as a very young child, he was always hushed right up, because it was believed to be dangerous to mention him, or bad luck, or something like that.

"He told how his father and uncles used to stew and debate about modernizing the barn, none of them ever mentioning the real issue — which wasn't sanitation or the expense, but the fact that everyone knew a *tomte* wouldn't bring seed into a barn with a floor; he had to have bare earth or nothing; and in fact, they put off modernizing year after year because of it, yet nobody ever came right out and said so! And how they kept horses instead of a tractor after all the other farms round about had switched to tractors; and treated the horses very, very well, too, because everybody knew a *tomte* was partial to horses and worked extra hard where they were well cared for. Stuff like that. How they put out a bowl of porridge for him every weekend, and he had to have a spoon made out of wood or horn, never of iron — oh, and lots more. Tipsy or not, the old guy was terribly good. He made us see exactly how it was.

"Well, so things went along like this until Mr. Lundqvist was fourteen or fifteen years old — about the age of my Scouts, actually — and he and the *tomte* were pretty good friends, even though it was kind of hard to be good friends with a *tomte* because they were so easily offended — 'touchy,' he called it. But one day the *tomte* came to Mr. Lundqvist while he was doing chores after school, and made a kind of declaration.

"Right out of the blue, he told him: 'I'm the last of my kind. All my relatives are dead. It's high time I put myself away, but I'm going to need you to help me, Gunnar.'"

On the boulder next to his, Anders saw the Hefn stir and lean slightly forward.

Brenda glanced quickly at Pomphrey, then went on with her story. "Well, naturally Mr. Lundqvist was very perplexed and upset, and he said, 'Do you mean *all* the other *tomtes* in Sweden are dead?' And the *tomte* said, 'That's not really what I mean, but it's none of your affair. I need you to think now: where's the coldest place we can get to? And how can we get there? If you were ever my friend, you'll help me now. In fact, you'll have to, because I won't get far on my own.'

"Well, to make a long story short, Mr. Lundqvist was very worried and sad and all, but he cudgeled his wits and decided he and the *tomte* could

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take the train up north somewhere if he disguised Lexi — that was the *tomte*'s name — as a dwarf —"

Pomphrey's entire body seemed to shudder. "Lexi," he murmured heavily, and, sliding down off the great stone, he stepped forward and laid his hairy hand upon Brenda's knee. "This *tomte*'s name was Lexi?"

Brenda stared at him. She shivered. "I should have said so right at the start. It was Lexi, or Alexi, or something pretty much like that."

"Lexi, short for Lexifrey," said Pomphrey. "Please go on, Miss Hollis. What *did* they do?" He did not remove his hand, which gave Anders the creeps, but there was no escaping anyway the terrible intensity of the Hefn's totally engaged regard.

II

CONNIE CRAWLED into the tent and shook the figure in the sleeping bag gingerly by the shoulder, wrinkling her face at the terrible smell. "They're gone," she said. "Listen, uh, Granddad, you can't stay here; there's no way we can hide you. Every so often Brenda checks the tents — and anyway, you just can't stay here anymore." Her face was a study in uncomfortableness.

The person stretched and yawned — while Connie grimaced and held her breath — then blinked bleary eyes at the girl. "Can't keep the old man, eh? Can't take care of your own granddaddy, is that it? Where'm I goin' to go, then?" His voice became wheedling. "Just a couple more days, eh? I won't be no trouble; I just got to keep out of sight for a little while."

"*No*," said Connie desperately, in over her head. "I *told* you, Brenda inspects the tents; and besides, the other kids don't like it. Here, you can eat this" — thrusting a sandwich wrapped in a paper napkin at him — "and then you really have to go."

The old man eyed this object with indifference. Absently he rubbed his stubbly chin, making a scraping sound within the tent's little island of silence, and shook his head sadly. "I thought you'd be glad to see your old granddaddy. I guess family don't mean what it used to anymore."

"Come on, you ran away from home yourself when you were my age, and didn't go back for twenty-five years!" said Connie with a flash of spirit. "You said so yourself. And anyway, I *was* glad to see you at first, but now. . . ." She trailed off miserably.

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"But now I'm just a smelly old drunk with a hangover," he finished for her. "Who said more than he should have last night and got himself in dutch. Ah well. I'm off, then — but where I'll spend this night, I wish I knew. Are you going to tell your mother how you ran me off so mean, when all I wanted was a place to sleep for a little while?"

Connie's face got red, and she sat back on her haunches. "Hey, *you* left my mother and Granny and Uncle Bill when Mom was only fifteen. One year older than me. I doubt if she'll be very mad." But at this he looked so woebegone that another terrible rush of remorse and indecision came over Connie like a wave of dizziness. "Look, I'll give you some money for a hotel. You don't have to sleep on the Field or anything, but now, no kidding, you've got to get out of here."

The sounds the cleanup squad was making outside had been gradually dropping off, and now were replaced by Brenda's voice calling the girls together. Connie jumped, rummaged hastily in her duffel, counted out some bills, put them down on her grandfather's knee inside the sleeping bag, and began to back out of the tent. "We're going on a hike. As soon as we're gone, you have to clear out of here; I mean it." She paused on hands and knees in the tent door. "But I really loved the stories last night; I really did; we all did. And I'm really sorry about everything. Bye. I hope you'll be O.K." She backed all the way out of the tent, pulled the zipper closed with a long screech that made her grandfather flinch, and let the outer flap fall to.

The old man sat a moment in the scented dimness. Outside, he could hear a girl's grim voice: "So is he going, or what?" and his granddaughter's equally grim reply: "He's going." He shrugged, fumbled with the zipper of the sleeping bag, gave up, and struggled with difficulty out of its end, like a snake shedding its skin. He scrounged for the bills where they had been shaken off onto the tent floor by his struggles, counted them, shrugged again, then folded them and put them in his shirt pocket. Since he was not undressed there was nothing else he needed to do.

He listened till the voices of the Scouts had faded in the distance, then crawled to the door and peered out. The coast looked clear. He pulled the zipper up cautiously and let himself out of the tent, glancing furtively about him for the Marines assigned to guard the campsite. But they were sitting on rocks way over by the Jeep road, smoking and exchanging remarks about the rear ends of the girls, which were now receding across

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the Field. They weren't looking for intruders *within* the site at all, and never noticed the old man slipping off through the trees in the other direction.

"He stole all the money his parents had in the house, bought two tickets on the overnight train to Lapland, smuggled the, ah, the *tomte* aboard — people would naturally not look too closely at a person with a physical deformity, so it must have been easier than it sounds — disembarked with him somewhere in the mountains, and left him there, presumably to freeze to death in a place of his own selection. Lundqvist did not suggest why Lexi should have chosen such a bizarre way to die, and seemed never to have felt much curiosity on the subject; at least the Scouts got that impression.

"He then bought a ticket to Göteborg with the rest of the money, persuaded a freighter to take him on — he must have looked some years older than his age — worked his way to America, where he wandered around, got a job someplace in the Middle West, married and settled down, and returned to Sweden twenty-six years after running away from home, as a journeyman carpenter whose hobby was Scandinavian folklore." Anders paused in his recitation of known facts to glance at Pomphrey; Pomphrey looked back at him without a trace of the pseudo-twinkle Anders had so disliked — as if, Anders thought, I were a bug or a stick. He suppressed a shiver.

Pomphrey, his voice just this side of menacing, now addressed Elisabeth Hall, who sat behind her desk wearing a frightened expression. "This '*tomte*' of Gunnar Lundqvist's was quite certainly a Hefn called Lexifrey. Evidently he was the last survivor of the group of twelve Hefn that our ship marooned in Scandinavia a little more than 350 years ago, as I assume you both have deduced from my extreme interest in him. A very convivial fellow, Lexifrey, and, as it happens, a relative of mine. You must see, Miss Hall, why it's absolutely necessary that we locate Gunnar Lundqvist."

Elisabeth cleared her throat. "To find out from him where your relative's grave might be."

"His grave?" Pomphrey shot her a look like a knife blade, sharp and steely. "Don't be quick to say so. Haven't you wondered why Lexi insisted on going so far north? He hoped to find a — a cleft or fissure in the permafrost, inside which he might induce in himself a state of very deep

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hibernation. In that state, in the right place, it's possible for a Hefn to sleep for decades. Miss Hall, he might still be alive up there."

"But — are you suggesting that Lexi might still have expected to be rescued?"

"I'm suggesting," said Pomphrey, "that there's a very good chance our time-window message, the one sent on our first visit, was received. I'm suggesting that he *knew* the ship would be back, and hoped to stay alive, by hibernating, until it returned. In that case, I believe he would have tried to leave clues to help us find him. Perhaps he told Gunnar Lundqvist rather more than Lundqvist told the Scouts. In any case, we must certainly pick the man up and question him."

"But surely Lundqvist would have come forward in 2006 if he'd had anything to tell you," Elisabeth protested. "Assuming he realized then that Lexi was a Hefn."

"That's not an assumption we can afford to make, Miss Hall. In any case, whether or not he made the connection, the fact remains that he did not come forward. We will have to ask him what he knows directly."

"But Lundqvist was just a boy," Anders blurted. "Fourteen or fifteen at the time, and this was nearly sixty years ago — is it likely he'll be able to remember *what* Lexi said or *where* they went together? There's still a lot of wild country in the north of Sweden. Back then, it would have been a great deal wilder."

The look Pomphrey sent him nearly made Anders bite his tongue. "Oh, we can help him remember," he said, almost blandly. "That's not our problem; our problem is to find him. You're going to have to help us, Miss Hall. You have an address, I suppose."

Elisabeth looked more flustered and frightened than ever. "We have one on record, but Lundqvist told me the other day — when he dropped by to ask if we had any work for him — that he'd moved out and was staying with a friend who had no phone, so we wouldn't be able to contact him quickly."

"You have the friend's address, though?"

"I'm afraid not. I paid Lundqvist by postgiro, at his request. He told me he no longer keeps an account at a bank."

"I see." Pomphrey stood abruptly on his short, strong legs. "Miss Hall, we are going to find that man, whether he wants to be found or not. If the Swedish Institute can't help us, I'll have to try the police."

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Anders said in agitation, "But what can the police do? They can hardly arrest him; it's not a crime to have helped your friend get himself into the mountains, or to be an alcoholic, or even to tell stories to little girls! All the *police* can do is make an appeal, perhaps over television — and what if Lundqvist refuses to turn himself in? He seems to be leading a very secretive sort of life."

Pomphrey waited for Anders to finish, then treated them both to his impression of an icy smile. "It doesn't matter what he wants. It doesn't matter how he feels about it. He's got to be found, and that's all there is to it. You two may as well understand this now, just as the police must be made to understand it — that Lundqvist's feelings in the matter are of no importance at all."

III

THE ALIENS had first arrived in the year 2006. After a fruitless attempt to find evidence of their stranded crew members, they had departed — and then unexpectedly returned a few years later after a change of command aboard their ship. They immediately demonstrated, convincingly enough for most people, that, had they chosen to, they could have blasted the surface of the Earth to flinders. Fortunately, the faction currently in control of the ship was more interested in trying to fix what was wrong with the Earth than in completing its destruction. They all also continued to be intensely concerned with the fates of their mutinous comrades marooned in Sweden and northern England, back in the mid-seventeenth century. So there they sat on the Moon, bristling with implacable power and potential menace, and sent their Observers — like so many imitations of the Seven Dwarfs — wherever they felt observation would prove most productive.

At the end of several months' busy, hands-off observing — while unofficial truces were declared between nations at war, and people milled about in near hysteria, waiting for the verdict — the Hefn requisitioned some scribes and dictated their Directive. This they presented to the secretary-general of the United Nations, to be translated and published in all the languages represented there.

When the document issued from the mechanical translators, cries of

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The measures called for by the aliens left nobody untouched by immediate hardship.

protest and distress rose up at once from every nation on Earth, for the measures called for by the aliens left nobody untouched by immediate hardship, and many would be ruined completely if they were followed.

A complicated, detailed document, the Directive's essential principles boiled down to this: the peoples of the Earth were to be given nine years to change their destructive ways of life. Nine years was all they would get. If, at the end of that period, they had not managed to meet the Hefn demands, Earth would be sterilized of human life: no appeals and no exceptions. It didn't say how, but few doubted they could do it, or that they would.

The Directive ordered humanity to restore their planet to a natural balance, whatever the cost, whatever suffering, famines, or economic disasters might follow. With the single exception of airplanes, nuclear and fossil fuels were to be phased out of use over the nine-year period; nothing but wood could be burned; nothing but water, wind, and sunlight could be used to generate electricity. Detroit and its kindred had nine years to perfect an electric automobile engine; in nine years' time, vehicles on major highways around the world would run on friction-reducing rails.

Everywhere on the planet, farmers were commanded to educate themselves in the principles of sustainable agriculture, for chemical fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides, and all but electric farm machinery, were to be replaced by botanicals and animal and green manures. Cover crops were mandated, to reduce the erosion of topsoil. Diversification was to replace monocultural farming practices everywhere; thousand-acre fields of corn and soybeans stretching beyond the horizon would be seen no more. Farmland sustained by aquifer-draining and soil-salinifying irrigation could not continue to be farmed.

The shakeup of agriculture would be complete, and the transition period a nightmare for farmers and consumers alike — particularly in light of the restrictions on industry and transportation, which decreed that goods must be moved over long distances only by river barge and rail.

The Directive said nothing about how botanical pesticides (for instance) were to be made and distributed under the new rules. They did

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not explain how the catalytic converters necessary to keep wood-burning stoves from themselves becoming a major source of air pollution could be manufactured — nor how the stoves themselves were to be forged in sufficient numbers to warm the houses of the world, nor how they were to reach the people who were going to need them. There was a lot they didn't say, but the implications made everyone frantic with worry.

Chlorofluorocarbons were not to be made or used. At all.

Reforestation was to commence immediately, on a dramatic scale. Also, not a single additional acre of rain forest was to be destroyed — some Tanzanian farmers found out fast what violating that one meant.

Further dumping of trash at sea was absolutely forbidden.

And so on.

In general, the Hefn Directive had the effect of setting the clock back about three centuries. That the world's human population had been many times smaller three centuries earlier, that the global village had come into being along with a computer-controlled and -dependent global economy, that the changes would have immense adverse implications for all the world's people and particularly the most heavily industrialized nations, that much hardship and even loss of life seemed inevitable if the Directive were fully complied with, that medical treatment and research could not continue at their present levels — all this appeared to matter little to the Hefn. Their concern was with *planetary* well-being.

The Directive was silent on the subject of the size and growth rate of the world's human population, but this silence was generally felt to be more ominous than reassuring.

It turned out that the aliens weren't all that interested in human affairs — politics, for instance, or crime. Wars, apart from nuclear wars, were not banned, nor even discouraged. Governments were left to get on with their own affairs — except that those affairs were now of necessity chiefly centered on bringing about the necessary changes in agriculture, industry, transportation, and waste disposal in time to meet the Hefn's deadline.

Naturally there was a lot of very hostile and fearful opposition to the Directive. (One clause, anticipating this, stated that anyone guilty of damaging a Hefn in any way would lose his memories, not simply beyond the age of ten — which is what had happened to the slash-and-burn farmers in Tanzania — but entirely.) Many despised the Hefn presence on Earth, and deplored their return.

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Yet a perhaps surprisingly large number of people discovered that they felt less resentment than a kind of sneaking gratitude. The world *was* in a terrible state, ecologically speaking. In the absence of a world government, nobody had had any idea how to set about fixing the situation. Now that the aliens had in effect assumed governorship of the world, the essential reforms might actually be carried out; and many people found that they felt relieved of an intense, if not quite conscious, strain.

In fact, quite a lot of people viewed the aliens as the potential saviors of mankind, and were out-and-out Hefn lovers. But often even these people were afraid. Nine years seemed very little time to change back, to localize institutions and practices that had long been national or international and make them *work*, or to find solutions to the immense number of problems posed by the Directive's restrictions, even with lots of help from the Hefn; and the aliens were therefore widely viewed with mixed feelings of guarded hope and open apprehension.

Given all this, it wasn't much to be wondered at that after Gunnar Lundqvist had allowed liquor — and the discovery of a granddaughter he hadn't known he had — to loosen his tongue on a certain subject for the only time in his life, his first instinct upon sobering up was to hide himself away from the Hefn Observer to the Swedish Government.

IV

SHARON STOOD to one side of the tent door, chewing her lower lip. "He's back."

"Oh, *no!*" Connie sagged, then pushed aside the netting and thrust herself past Sharon into the tent. "What are you *doing* here? I told you you can't stay, and that's what I meant!"

The old man looked at her pleadingly, sober now and rheumy-eyed. "I know you did, but honey, I didn't have nowhere else to go. They're trying to find me. Them Hefn are. There's announcements in the papers and on the TV and radio — that leader of yours told that Hefn that came out here yesterday, and now they're going right into people's houses looking for me."

"What for? What did you *do?*"

"Nothing! I didn't do nothing, but they think the *tomte* I told you all about — the one I knew on the farm when I was a boy, that I went up

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north with on the train — they think *he* was one of them Hefn they left here all that time ago, and they want to ask me where I took him."

"What for?" said Connie again.

The old man moaned. "Ah, they think he might still be alive up there, like some kind of frozen Rip Van Winkle!"

Connie's face lost some of its tension; she sat back on her heels. "Really? Do *you* think Lexi could have been a Hefn?"

"Lexi was a *TOMTE*," the old man said fiercely. "He worked on the farm. He didn't come off no spaceship."

"Well . . . but why not just tell 'em where you went, anyway? I mean, just to get 'em off your case."

"Because I don't *remember*," Gunnar Lundqvist wailed gently. "It was sixty years ago, pretty near! I don't even recollect the name of the town where we got off the train — someplace in the mountains; that's all I know!"

"So tell them that," said Connie reasonably.

"Think they'd settle for that? Ha! They'd get it out of me," her grandfather said, his voice full of fear even Connie could recognize. "They've got ways of digging out old memories — that's what the papers are saying. Just like they can take memories away, like they did with them poor Africans that cut down the jungle. I don't want nothing to do with it! I was a goddamn fool to shoot my big mouth off the other night! I ain't never told about Lexi before — what did I want to go telling about him now for? I didn't do nothing wrong when I went up there with him — they got no right to go digging around in my mind if I don't want 'em to!"

Connie frowned. For once she agreed with the old man, and besides, she could tell he was frightened out of his wits. "Oh, O.K. You can stay till we leave here — but that's only three more days, Granddad. And I'll have to tell Brenda, because there's no way we could hide you and keep her from finding out."

Lundqvist squeezed his eyes shut. "She'll tell," he wheezed. "She told before, and she'll do it again."

Connie got up. "I don't think so, but anyway, that's a chance we'll have to take. I'm gonna go get her right now." She crouched through the netting and zipped it behind her, and he heard her tell her tentmate, still lurking outside, "I'm going to get Brenda."

While waiting for his immediate fate to be settled, the old man got

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the shakes and took a nip from a bottle in his inside coat pocket. He cursed himself again under his breath for several kinds of a fool. Again he saw his hand on the brass plate of the door of *Systembolaget*, the government-controlled liquor store, his rumpled and grizzled image reflected in the glass, the fresh notice taped beside it: "WANTED: good information leading to the whereabouts of GUNNAR LUNDQVIST, 73, height 1.8 meters, weight 74 kilos, hair gray, eyes blue, recently of Storskärsgatan 47, Stockholm. May be disheveled. This man is urgently wanted by the Hefn Observer and the Police. Reward."

They *would* post their notices at *Systemet* — at every liquor store in the city, having deduced the likelihood of his spending the institute honorarium on booze. He thought with dismay of his image in the glass. I look a hundred years old, he thought, and then: I always did look old for my age; the *H. C. Andersen* wouldn't have signed me on if I hadn't. What a big, husky fellow I was at fourteen, and what a mistake it's all turned out to be.

That young woman, Brenda, could not be trusted, whatever she said. She would betray him to the Marine guards under whose noses he had crept back into the empty campsite, and collect the reward; and the guards would turn him over to the Hefn, and they would tie him down and put a silver helmet on his head and zap him with electrical charges and pry his memories out of him, and he would be helpless to protect himself. He shuddered and groaned with horror.

Connie was back. He heard low voices outside, and then the Scout leader crouched into the tent behind his granddaughter. "Hello, Mr. Lundqvist. Connie's explained your problem. The trouble is, we aren't very well equipped to hide a fugitive here, and I'm afraid you're putting us in a very awkward position."

"That's just where you've put me, young lady," Lundqvist answered her back with energy. "You didn't need to go telling that Hefn about me. It's your fault I'm in this predicament now."

"Yes, well." Brenda frowned unhappily. "It's true I had no idea they'd mount a house-to-house search for a person who hadn't committed a crime. And — well — I suppose I thought you'd be pleased to help out — since you'd helped Lexi, you know."

"Hell, I'd help 'em out if I could remember where we went, but I don't want no part of them mind-reading machines," the old man fired back.

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"And if you think they'll let me refuse to let 'em *use* their contraptions on me, then you're a bigger fool than I am."

Brenda slumped back on her heels. Lundqvist was probably right: once they had him, what he'd done would be squeezed out of him by any means they possessed. Brenda doubted that these means would cause pain or disability, but the idea that the old man's feelings would be disregarded by the aliens upset her badly. Resentment gave a new color to Brenda's own view of the Hefn, for she was — had been — a thoroughgoing Hefn lover, one who regarded the ship as a deus ex machina, bringing humanity's last, best hope for averting self-destruction.

It was an awkward situation, one Lundqvist had accused her — not unfairly — of having created herself.

"All right. We'll hide you till Saturday," she said. "But we leave on Saturday, and after that I'm afraid you'll have to take your chances." (Connie gave her an odd look — whether of approval or dismay, she was unable to tell.) "It's a good thing it didn't occur to me to tell Pomphrey you were Connie's grandfather — if he knew that, he'd have been back here looking for you already." She glanced around at the girl. "You kids will sleep one each in the other tents. The whole troop will have to be in on this," she added to Lundqvist, "and I can't guarantee one of them won't tell somebody before Saturday. I'll do my best to discourage it; that's all I can promise. And I hate to think what their parents are going to say."

"I'm obliged to you," said Lundqvist sourly.

V

ANDERS EKLUND was just finishing his lunch in the restaurant atop Kaknastornet when two business types sat down at his table (all the others being full). The businessmen were having exactly the same lunch as Anders: a dish of thick yellow pea soup and plate-sized, rolled up thin pancakes with lingonberry sauce. Every restaurant in Sweden would be serving this traditional Thursday repast; Anders hadn't needed to come all the way out to Gardet just for the meal. He'd come because he very much liked being up in the tower, and had hoped the long, familiar vistas would soothe and lift his spirits.

The two men unloaded their trays onto Anders's table, after asking and being granted permission ("*Ar det ledigt har?*" "*Javisst.*") Anders lit a

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cigarette and sat morosely fiddling his fork in the smear of purple lingonberry juice left on his plate, while the men picked up their conversation. He smiled grimly to himself when he realized they were mimicking not only his lunch, but also the argument that had been going on in his mind.

"They're saving the world, little friend. The one *we* damaged almost beyond repair and can't begin to fix; how can we ask them to respect all our rights as free citizens when *we're* responsible for the mess *they've* got to get us out of?"

His companion replied, "I know, I know, I know everything you're going to say, but I still insist that when you undertake a house-to-house search for a person who is not a criminal, then the means simply fail to justify the end."

"Should the world-savers be expected to justify themselves to the world-wasters, do you think?"

The other man shook his head impatiently. "That's all very well, Sven-Erik; but don't you find yourself wondering what *else* we'll be forced to accept from the Hefn, before they've finished with us?"

"Oh, a great many things, I've no doubt — some very unpleasant ones, too," Sven-Erik replied, steadily spooning soup. "But if there were an easy, agreeable way to undo the damage, we wouldn't need the Hefn to show it to us, would we?" He jabbed his spoon at his friend. "You have to remember, Pelle: *we* are the criminals, and the Hefn are the judicial system now. They don't have to account to *us* for anything they do."

Pelle, turning bright red, threw his own spoon down with a clatter. "If you really mean that, then you're accepting the fact that we are at the mercy of tyrants! And this is just the beginning — today it's that poor old drunk, but we're all going to feel the force of the Directive soon enough; you know we are." He leaned across the table toward his friend, and his voice rose angrily. "If a million people have starved or frozen to death a year or two from now, because they can't get food or fuel under the new transport regulations, what will you say then?" Several heads turned; he added more quietly: "Will it still be, 'They don't have to account to *us criminals* for anything they do'?"

Anders stubbed out his half-smoked cigarette and scraped his chair back: *Enough of this!* He stalked out and rode the elevator up one flight to the observation room, with its panoramic views of the city, the Field, the Nordic and Maritime Museums, the canal leading out between central

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Stockholm and the harbor, and the large island of Djurgarden just across the water. The room was moderately crowded; Anders had to wait for a turn at the mounted field glasses. He leaned on the railing meantime and brooded through the dirty glass.

His turn finally came, just in time for Anders to be the first to spot the approaching police helicopter. He fished a fifty-crown coin out of his pants pocket, jammed it into the slot, and swiveled the binoculars to focus on the chopper in time to see it land close to the Americans' campsite.

He saw the two Marines and two policemen jump out, saw them duck under the spinning rotors and run into the birches, and he swore. A few minutes later — long enough to cost Anders another fifty crowns — they emerged, supporting a gray-headed figure one on each side. The people in the room behind Anders were questioning and exclaiming, sounding puzzled and uneasy or curious; none seemed to realize what was going on. Just before the timer clicked off, he caught a good look at the old fellow who was obviously the fugitive Lundqvist — at his horrified face as he was boosted into the chopper. Anders swore again.

Seconds later the helicopter lifted off. Anders, having relinquished the binoculars, saw through the window glass a now-tiny figure he somehow knew to be Brenda Hollis walk out alone toward the spot where the chopper had set down. He bolted back to the elevators; when he left the tower he was running.

It was one of the Girl Scouts, not Brenda, who had told — a girl who'd been flirting with the guards all week and who had finally been unable to resist teasing them: *I know something you don't know!*

The two Marines on duty at the time had argued about what to do. One sympathized completely with the old man's position; he had a right to refuse to cooperate. But the other wanted the manhunt called off. His leave had been canceled; he'd had to change plans that might be on again if he could get it back. The rights and wrongs of the situation interested him not at all.

Brenda said to Pomphrey, who had come along to make the "arrest": "I don't understand you. This old man turned his whole life upside down to help your friend; is this any way to reward him for that?"

The look Pomphrey presented to her then lacked any resemblance to a human expression. As the police hauled Gunnar Lundqvist out of the

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tent, he said, "Your values are not ours, Miss Hollis. This may be no reward, but neither is it the punishment you both appear to think."

"But Lexi was his *friend*," she protested, near tears.

"Lexi wasn't no friend to me," Lundqvist said bitterly. A uniformed policeman held each of his arms, and he stood trapped and vulnerable between them in his stained clothes and stubble, a pathetic figure lent a certain dignity by his very bitterness. "*I* was *Lexi*'s friend, but hell, he didn't care nothing about me, didn't even like me much. He *used* me, though — he didn't mind doing that, moaning and shaking his head till I gave in — and I was too blame weak; I thought he'd be grateful. Grateful my eye! I wish to Christ I'd never raised my hand to help him."

"But you did, and so now we must find out where he is. Put him in the helicopter," Pomphrey said to the escort. Behind him clustered the Scouts, bewildered and upset; the girl who had "told" stood by herself, crying ostentatiously into a Kleenex.

"It isn't *right*," Brenda said fiercely, clenching her fists at her sides.

"It's necessary," Pomphrey replied. "Surely what's necessary is neither right nor wrong? Good-bye, Miss Hollis. I hope we'll meet again."

They watched the helicopter take off, the forlorn group of girls and a distraught Brenda. In a moment, Connie came over and leaned against Brenda's shoulder. "Why didn't the Marines just refuse to help? And the Swedes, too — the police?"

Brenda pulled a tissue out of her jeans pocket and blew her nose. She put her arm around Connie. "Nobody knows what would happen, honey. That's the trouble. Everybody's afraid to stand up to the Hefn when they want something as much as they wanted to find Mr. Lundqvist. We're not sure what they'd do, or who they'd do it to. We just know what they *could* do — blow up the world, or take our memories away." She smiled shakily at Connie.

"They didn't do anything to *us*, for hiding my granddad."

"No. But they found him almost right away; it might have been different if they'd gotten frustrated."

"I wonder," said Connie savagely, "what Marcia's going to spend that reward money on."

"A flak jacket, if she's got any sense." Brenda gave Connie a little squeeze. "The Hefn are going to show us how to clean the world up, sweetie; don't ever forget that."

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"*Make* us clean it up. I know," Connie said dispiritedly. In a moment she added, "What'll they do to my grandfather now?"

"Probably just get him to remember where he went with Lexi, and then let him go. I don't think they'll hurt him at all, if only because I doubt they'll need to."

"He was so *scared*." Connie sniffed a little.

Brenda hugged the girl again briefly, then let her go and walked away by herself, down through the birches to the place below the trees where the helicopter had landed. She stood on the spot, breathing deeply. The Scouts, showing unusual sensitivity for them, left her alone. Ten minutes later Anders Eklund found her still there. "Miss Hollis, I must apologize," he gasped — he had been sprinting. "I saw what just happened. Please, please believe me, I myself had nothing whatsoever to do with this — it was that *förbaskade* Hefn — I wanted you to know —"

With some difficulty, Brenda brought herself to focus on Anders. "I hadn't supposed it was any of your doing. If anybody's to blame it was me."

Anders had still not caught his breath, but was trying anyway to adjust his expression to one of relative dignity and control. Abruptly he gave the effort up. "What's to become of us?" he broke out. "What will these Hefn have made us into, before they're through?"

Brenda shook her head. "I've just been trying to work that out," she said, and stared at the ground, and scuffed her jogging shoe in the grass.

CODA

THE HEFN dealt firmly but gently with Gunnar Lundqvist, and released him when they were through with him, undamaged in body or mind and richer by several thousand crowns. That same day a Swedish military plane loaded with three Hefn, a dozen young Swedes doing their compulsory stint of military service, and a time terminal, took off for the northern city of Ostersund.

At the Ostersund airport, they transferred the personnel and equipment into two covered army trucks and headed in convoy over a twisting mountain road toward the town of Ragunda. Just southeast of the town, on the bank of a stream called Indalsalven, they made a camp and set up the time window at the base of Doda fallet: The Dead Mountain.

This was the place where Lexi and the fourteen-year-old Lundqvist had

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parted company. No one in the whole world knew what Lexi had done then; the Hefn would try to pick him up via the time window in order to discover where, or whether, he had eventually gone to ground.

Nothing had turned up in the old man's memory that could be construed as a message from Lexi to his rescuers — nothing to indicate that the message they had sent six years before, in Skane, had been received, or that Lexi expected them to find him, unless his very effort to live a little longer by such desperate means was a sign that he knew they would be coming. But in that case, why hadn't he told Lundqvist something to aid them more materially? How could he expect to be found if nobody knew where to look?

It seemed little less than a miracle that the terminal, oscillating for weeks through a range of days and times (for young Lundqvist hadn't himself known the precise date of his journey) made contact with Sweden's final *tomte* just after he had sent his companion away, and before he had succeeded in locating a place to sleep. There was mutual rejoicing. The Hefn reset the terminal for a couple of days later, to allow Lexi time to choose his spot, then reestablished contact so he could give them coordinates and directions.

The directions were concise. They found his body, partly decomposed and frozen solid, exactly where he told them it would be.

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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

The City, Not Long After, Pat Murphy, Bantam Spectra, $4.50

Destiny Express, Howard A. Rodman, Antheneum, $17.95

A LONG TIME ago — before Pat Murphy was born — I wrote a book called *False Night*, and all would have been well but the editor was caused to cut it by fifteen thousand words — and half a dozen other books with it — in galleys, over a weekend. (Economy measure.) Well sir, it bothered me, especially since it was my first novel, but this was back in the primitive days of 1953 and nothing could be done about it. At any rate, Harlan Ellison republished it in 1963, when she was in knee pants (Murphy, not Ellison), and so I finally got it all out, plus a little bit more, in *Some Will Not Die*. And since then it has been out in several editions, in the U.S. as well as elsewhere, so that to this day it is earning me money.

I bring you this news, which you had no idea you wanted, because in many ways Murphy's *The City, Not Long After* is the exact antithesis of my book. And it's a likeable, in many ways excellent, book; mine and Murphy's. The difference is in the span of time since the one was written; I like Murphy's better.

Both books start with the proposition that the entire world has been decimated by a plague — if we take decimated to mean 90% dead. In my New York, certain choices are made, and the result is that military force eventually has to be used to create a unified nation out of the East Coast. In Murphy's San Francisco, the leader of the military force is the villain; San Francisco is doing just fine without him, and his incursion on the City is an unqualified disaster.

I don't know — nor, except to satisfy my curiosity, do I care — whether Murphy has ever even heard of *Some Will Not Die* in any incarnation. The operational effect is so striking that the one book has to be seen as an answer to the

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other. And this poses certain problems for me as a writer that may or more probably may not be germane to me as a book reviewer. So let's leave that aspect of it for the time being and move on to the review.

In Murphy's book, the principal character is the woman — the nameless daughter of Mary Laurenson, born after the plague, who has been promised to the angel to name in return for the angel's help at her birth. The angel — half human, half machine — is the only one who can help Mary Laurenson, because she is utterly alone. The angel is parareal; eventually, several people in this book see it, but there is a definite question as to whether it exists or not.

At any rate, the woman grows to the age of sixteen on Mary Laurenson's farm, teaching herself to do most things that are needful, although her mother teaches her to read, and not caring, because she doesn't really know, how much has been lost. She is aware of the fact that her mother came out from San Francisco after the plague and took up a solitary life on the farm, but her day to day life is much more important to her than questions about what her mother did before she was born. And she doesn't know about the Angel; being that she is the only other human being on the farm, she doesn't need a name and so doesn't question its absence. Her mother, too, doesn't see any reason to tell her; in fact, her mother, despite the fact that she proves to be a potent motivating force in this book, does not emerge as a clearcut character in her own right.

When she is sixteen, all that changes. She goes to a market fair with her mother, where she sees General Miles, and does not like him. (Nor should she; his soldiers burn a cart full of books.) He speaks of reconstituting America, and the godless atheistic communists who will come out of San Francisco and murder them all in their beds if they do not take San Francisco first, and this is all well and good, but she views it with suspicion anyway. And she has never heard of America, nor does she see any need for it, whatever it is.

A few days later, a trader named Leon stops at the farm, and a few days after that everything changes forever. Leon and her mother are taken by the soldiers. Eventually, the woman gets her mother released, but not long after the mother tells the girl of the Angel, and there is a golden flash and a thunder of wings, and the mother goes away to San Francisco, leaving the daughter to follow as best she can.

Or so it seems. Alternatively, the mother died and the Angel is a

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creation of the woman's mind, but there are practical difficulties with this reading, and I prefer to think that the parareal Angel is the right one. In any case, the woman sets out for San Francisco, and, after some adventures, get there.

We enter upon the second section of the book, which concerns itself with only a few things: the woman's quest for her mother, the introduction of various key characters , the naming of the woman. This is not quite how Murphy divides up her book, but it will serve.

The quest for her mother leads her up and down the streets of San Francisco, and the City is both real and unreal, in that, like the Angel, it behaves in ways that do not seem to be characteristic of the cities I know, yet are ways that are of the cities I wish. Her footsteps appear to be guided, in some way, but the City is real.

I do not know if this is the most apt example of what I mean, but nothing better comes to mind. Fairly early in this section, she comes upon a house that is entirely engulfed by vines, in a section where the vines have taken over. But the front door of the house is open, and the house has become a magic bower, with flowers and herbs growing out of the front hall rug. Everywhere — even in the partly played Scrabble game that makes no sense to her — moss and lichen have transformed everything. She sits upon a chair to rest and gather herself, and closes her eyes, and hears three clicks. When she opens them, three of the Scrabble tiles have been everted, to spell out JAX, and this she takes for her name.

Now, clearly, nothing will account for this phenomenon but the momentary presence of the Angel. But the rest of it, although beautiful and strange, is just the working of wind, weather and natural growth. On the third hand, she not only came upon this house in a way that was as if her footsteps were guided, she can never find it again. And she takes it as perfectly natural for the tiles to evert, when from our point of view — I suppose it's our point of view — it is anything but. She simply accepts that she has been named.

This happens again, later in the book. She comes upon a house that was her mother's house. There is some slight reason to doubt that it actually was her actual mother's house, but that is only because it seems so unlikely that in all the City of San Francisco, she should not only wander within the vicinity of the house, she should *know* that it is her mother's house on the basis of no physical evidence whatsoever. But once in, she finds not only photographs of a woman much

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resembling a younger, brighter version of the woman she knew, but many other things which will pay off as we get deeper into the book — bearing in mind, of course, that the payoffs are themselves fantastic.

Another thing she does is make the acquaintance of a number of San Franciscans, most particularly Danny-boy, who is supervising the painting of the Golden Gate Bridge blue, and The Machine, who among other things builds numerous solar-powered self-propelled robots who roam the City, and the sculptor who created the Garden of Light, and Mrs. Migsdale, who publishes the weekly paper, and Edward Brown, who runs the library now and is known as Books. As well as numerous other artists who have transformed large sections of the City in various different ways, and Randall, who may be a werewolf.

With Danny-boy, she loses her virginity. And one other thing happens; she climbs up a cable of the Golden Gate Bridge, following one of the ubiquitous monkeys; she begins to weep; the tears turn into blue butterflies; the butterflies, in turn, applique themselves to the Bridge, making it unnecessary to paint the rest.

By now — in fact, long ago — you have concluded that this whole novel is para-real. If, however, you have any doubts, consider what happens to General Miles — called Fourstar by his enemies — when he invades San Francisco. I won't tell you what it is, because that would give away too much of the book. But it is sufficient to make of this a very para-real novel.

All in all, a moving, and an excellent, book. I have my detail quarrels with it — the Machine's autogyro won't fly, for instance, but that is the author failing to get her research right, not the author failing to get the image right; basically, it is that autogyros have no linkage between the aircraft engine and the rotating vanes, and require no torque-compensating rotor blade, unlike helicopters — and I don't like Jax for the heroine's name because the only two things it makes me think of are Jacksonville and Jax Beer, both located in Florida — but if that is the level of quarrel one has to have with this book, one is really reaching.

But what of the contrast with *Some Will Not Die*, which is an uncompromisingly real book, in the sense that any departures from strict rationality are unintended? Well, I'll tell you, the thing is, I would rather — much, much rather — live in Murphy's San Francisco than I would in my New York. More important, I believe Danny-boy when he says that to resist Four-

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star with force is to become as the enemy. Murphy does nothing essential with reality to make that come out; she plays it straight, or straight enough.

I do not know which book hews closer to the truth of it; I know which book I would rather have hewing closer to the truth of it, and it isn't mine.

Which brings us to Howard A. Rodman's *Destiny Express*. And you may as well know, right now, that it hasn't a word of fantasy or science fiction in it, or, for that matter, any form of being anything than what it is, which is a novel about Fritz Lang and Thea von Harbou working out the last days of their marriage against the background of UFA film studio politics and the rise of Nazism in the 1930s.

Lang and von Harbou have already made *Metropolis* and *Frau im Mond*; Lang is in the last moments of *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* as the book opens. His marriage to von Harbou is over, though they continue to live together. Von Harbou has a mysterious American, Sam Harrison, for a lover. Lang has Lili — although she is never home when he calls. Which may be all to the good, because it's obvious he's still in love with von Harbou.

But you may be wondering how come I'm reviewing this. Well, it's very simple; Harlan Ellison, who once, long ago, was the editor of Regency Books, first publisher of the complete *Some Will Not Die*, called me up not too long ago and said his friend, Howard A. Rodman, son of an old friend, had a book out and would I review it? He described it in extravagant terms, of course, such heart-stoppers as "neo-realism" and "I don't really know what it is, but it's terrific," which, as I suspected, turned out to be hogwash — it's perfectly plain what the book is, though I'll grant him the terrific part — and I agreed to do it if it seemed to me that some good reason could be found for foisting it off on you. And the good reason is that it's about Fritz Lang and Thea von Harbou.

It's about the Nazis, too, which makes it interesting because I was alive in Nazi Germany at the same time, and although I was just a very small child, it seems to me that the Rodman book captures something that no other book has done quite as well if at all: the glorifying effect of Nazism on the insufficiently talented.

This has not been sufficiently understood. But one of the many effects of Nazism was to provide opportunites for career advancement that could have come in no other way. First of all, the first-raters, in this case in the film in-

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dustry, tended to get out while there was still time, barely. Rodman's book is replete with the names of people who next turn up in Hollywood, in the front ranks for years thereafter. Second of all, the Nazis were uncomfortable with first-rank talent; they saw it as undisciplined and inclined to go its own way, when what was wanted was a vigorous film industry cranking out goods intended to make the German people feel good about specific things. So they simply declared the second-raters first rate, and gave them all the privileges of the first rank.

I would like to see a book about a second-rate film maker gradually realizing that he is second-rate. Because that must have happened; despite all the limousines and the parties that were almost (but not quite) what they should have been, the simple fact remains that there must have been times when a man's reach and a man's grasp both fell short; when what appeared on the film was, simply, cliched despite its maker's best efforts, and a certain pale wraith began stalking the gilded corridors. But that's another book.

In Rodman's book, set in Fritz Lang's last few days in Germany, Lang appears as a two-sided fellow. On the one hand, he pines for von Harbou to a point of obsession, a case which is made worse by the fact that, thanks to repairs on the home where she now usually stays, she is living with him in the Berlin apartment which was originally just a *pied a terre* for him. Living with him, but seeing Sam pretty constantly, a fact which is signalled by a red rose in a vase in the foyer, to tell Lang not to wait up for her.

In this involvement, Lang tends to remind one of the stricken professor of *The Blue Angel;* it takes him forever to realize that *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* is never going to be released as it was made, the two men in the Mercedes are secret police, etc.; he simply does not pay attention until ludicrously late in the game.

On the other hand, he wakes up quick enough when Joseph Goebbels offers him the chance to supervise all films being made in Germany in the future. This is the artist being addressed, and even before Goebbels stops speaking, he is planning exactly how he will catch the train to Paris and thence Hollywood.

Thea has to stay. Under the new regime, she has been offered a chance to direct. True, the first film is a piece of *kitsch,* but the one after that, or the one after that, will be a real film, she is sure.

Rodman tells all this — and much more — with a quiet deftness

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that is all the more impressive when you realize that he has no actual idea, for instance, of how a Lufthansa plane ride would have gone in those days — he has it exactly right, by my mother's account; the experience would be almost impossible to duplicate with any of today's equipment.

I think it's a hell of book. Thank God I never wrote one like it.

You will have noticed, I hope, a certain absence of footnotes in this column. I just plain didn't have any; maybe next time.

Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

UNCLE ORSON'S favorite F&SF Books for 1989 (in alphabetical order by title):

Cyberbooks, Ben Bova (TOR)

Comedy gets no respect, and satire closes out of town — but as far as I'm concerned, this satire is onstage for a long run. Bova is in fine form with a hilariously nasty look at the future — and the present — of the publishing industry. And behind the satire you can see that Bova knows and cares deeply about the people who make books.

Imago, Octavia Butler (Warner)

Butler caps the series that began with *Dawn* and *Adulthood Rites* with this story of human beings struggling for species identity in the face of a genetic challenge from ruthless-yet-compassionate aliens. Which is more important, asks Butler, what we were or what we are becoming?

Nemesis, Isaac Asimov (Doubleday/Foundation)

One of the great writers of science fiction at the peak of his form. Asimov doesn't neglect interesting scientific ideas in this story of a reclusive space colony that discovers an inhabited planet, but in this as with his other recent novels he has turned to serious explorations

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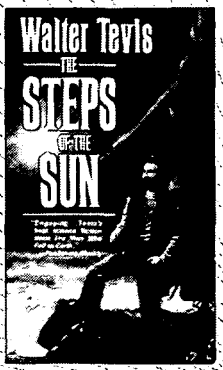

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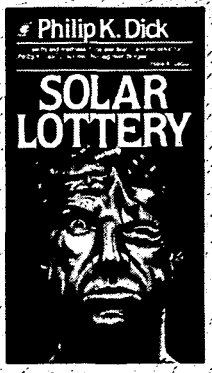

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of ethics and metaphysics that deserve more than mere bestsellerdom.

On My Way to Paradise, Dave Wolverton (Bantam)

The best first novel I've ever read; I believe this book marks the beginning of the career of a writer who will be both popular and influential. This story of a Latin American doctor caught up in interplanetary warfare is also a breakthrough in opening science fiction to other cultures.

Tourists, Lisa Goldstein (Simon & Schuster)

Brilliant strangeness mingles with a lucid view of the human soul in a story that still returns to me in my dreams. A tortured American family is caught up in an ancient struggle between rival groups in a magical mideast city. It's a gripping read, and yet it has the depth and vision that make it one of the great American novels of the 1980s.

Uncle Orson's Favorite YA Books of 1989 (in alphabetical order by title):

Eva, Peter Dickinson (Delacorte)

Not for the timid is Dickinson's unsparing look at an adolescent girl caught in the body of a chimp, struggling to survive in a world where humanity has rejected nature, and now nature is rejecting humanity. Dickinson is one writer who regularly proves that some of the best adult science fiction is marketed for teenagers.

The Golden Thread, Suzy McKee Charnas (Bantam)

The third in Charnas's series about a girl gifted with wizardly power in contemporary Manhattan, this may be the best. The characters are real, and the struggle between good and evil transcends the usual cliches. Charnas is especially good at suffusing everyday cityscapes with magic, danger, and supernatural beauty.

The Jedera Adventure, Lloyd Alexander (Dutton)

The Vesper Holly series began as a lark, with little to bite into but much to enjoy. The fun is still there, but with this book Alexander — perhaps inadvertantly — has struck deeper chords. True, the young bluestocking heroine has come to this Arab land just to return a library book, but the absurd premise leads to grand romance by the end.

* * *

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The Boat of a Million Years, Poul Anderson (TOR, cloth, 470 pp, $19.95)

The scope of the idea is breathtakingly audacious: A novel that shows us human history through the eyes of the few individuals who were there to see it all. A handful of genetic oddities, these people can be killed — but if nature takes its course, they heal too fast, reject disease too easily, regenerate too thoroughly ever to die on their own.

Because it's Anderson writing this novel, it is a fine thing to read. The pace never relents, and as the characters struggle to deal with societies as varied as newly-Moslem Palestine, the Ukraine under the Golden Horde, and the American West, each episode is fascinating. The characters all come together in our own time, led by Hanno, a Phoenician who has caught a vision of what, together, these immortals might become. And when study of their genes leads to immortality for all of humanity, it is only natural that these last relics of a society in which survival was a struggle are the ones who turn outward and sail a starship out to greet another species for the first time.

I expect to see this novel on the final ballot for every award in the field; but even though I enjoyed it very much, I must confess to a few regrets. First, it seems to me that most of the episodes center around the same scene: an immortal hemming and hawing as he or she confesses what he is to another immortal. Sometimes I think this scene was repeated at the expense of far more powerful scenes we never see. We always seem to catch the characters *after* they have already buried a spouse of two. Only once do we get even a glimmer of the mixed pain and relief of a character discovering for the first time that he must be immune to death, while all the people he loves die around him. Perhaps it's wrong to charge a book for what the author *doesn't* do, but in this case I think such scenes were surely obligatory, and the book is weaker for the lack of them.

Second, I think that during the contemporary and future chapters, the book gets distracted from what made it work so well up to then. While Anderson carefully avoids coming down finally in any political position, there's a bit too much competent-man authoritarianism (Heinlein is specifically referred to in the only completely embarassing scene in the novel) for me to avoid concluding that the author has some sympathy for that position. That's not a flaw because I disagree with the politics — it's a flaw because I found it hard to believe that people who've seen everything for

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hundreds or thousands of years can't come up with anything better. Even beyond political questions, however, it is plain that the author is trapped in the concerns of our time, and particularly the concerns of the science fiction community. Of course *all* authors are trapped in their own time — but this book absolutely required that its author do a better job of disguising the fact.

To most readers, though, these reservations of mine will seem to be mere quibbling, and perhaps so. Indeed, I think they are not so much flaws in the book as opportunities that Anderson missed. The result is that, while this great literary project has been well attempted, it has not been fully accomplished. But I'd rather see a writer fall a little short of a Great Work than fail abysmally at a trivial one, which is by far the more common failing in literature.

The Divide, Robert Charles Wilson (Doubleday/Foundation, cloth 249pp, $19.95)

Wilson's stories have a deceptive sort of quietness about them. You think you're reading a character study — a fascinating one — and then all of a sudden you find yourself gripping the book with sweating fingers, turning the pages vigorously as you plunge forward, eager to find out what happens next, tense with the jeopardy of people you've come to know and care about. At the end, with its quiet fade, you feel that you've lived through something far more real than any overt action-adventure tale, with characters you understood better than the people living in the same house with you.

At heart, *The Divide* is actually a hoary old sf situation: A "mad doctor" in the 1950s, by muddling the growth hormones in a developing embryo, created a child whose intelligence and neural quickness far surpassed that of any normal human beings. But then the doctor's project loses its funding and goverment support, and the child is fostered out to a family that is unprepared to deal with his uncanny skills and powers.

Where Wilson departs from cliche is in his structure, which is intricate but perfect. We deal with John's childhood only in flashback; we meet him and know him first as a man who has coped with his alienation by creating a secondary personality, Benjamin, who is perfectly normal and kind and compassionate — the opposite of John, who is disdainful of mere humans, and desperately lonely for their love and respect. We see each of these personalities through the eyes of the women who love him. Benjamin's lover is Amelie, a French-Canadian

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waitress who finds in him — even with his multiple-personality episodes — the stability that she despaired of ever finding in her rootless life. John's lover is a young scientist who comes at first to study him, then to love him, and finally to try to save him from the neural breakdown that seems the most likely outcome of the experiment that produced him.

There is also Amelie's brother, Roch, who, as a victim of fetal alcohol syndrome, is as much a product of intrauterine meddling as John. Though Roch is violent and as slow-minded as John is quick, he and John are twins in their feeling of isolation among normal people. "But a human being raised by apes isn't a superior ape," muses John. "In all the qualities that matter to apes, he's not much of an ape at all." What saves John from being a brilliant verson of Roch is Benjamin, a personality that he thinks he invented as a disguise, but which might in fact have been his true soul after all.

Robert Charles Wilson is a fine storyteller and an equally talented writer, the sheer pleasure of his language is echoed in the clarity of his thought. His speculations on the nature of intelligence are as fascinating as his exploration of character. All in all, Wilson is the best example I've seen of a writer who is using the techniques and tropes of science fiction to produce significant literary accomplishments. He is not alone in making the attempt, but he has precious little company in having succeeded at it.

Castleview, Gene Wolfe (TOR, cloth 400pp, $19.95)

I began this novel full of hope, for when Wolfe writes in a contemporary setting he seems not to indulge in the sort of obscurity that has so marred my pleasure in reading *Soldier of the Mist* and *Soldier of Arete*. And for many pages my hopes were fully justified. The novel begins with a family moving into a house in the country, whose current residents are leaving because of the death of their husband and father. There are promises of a budding romance between the teenagers of the two families. There's also a dash of magic in the fleeting visions of a castle that have been seen often enough to have given the town its name: Castleview.

Alas, the strangeness comes on so quickly that the human story is almost completely lost; and, while other readers may be able to sort their way through the Arthurian references to arrive at some coherent picture of what happened, I was left clueless. I wasn't sure which character represented which Arthu-

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As we write, spring training seems but a distant dream, so we turn gratefully to this new baseball story by Harry Turtledove ("Batboy," December 1988). "DH" is SF rather than fantasy and about softball rather than hard, but it's more fun than an extra inning slugfest.

Designated Hitter

By Harry Turtledove

YOU FIND ALL kinds playing beer-league softball. I ought to know. They let me play, for instance.

I've been a baseball nut since I was a kid. Unfortunately, I'm also a klutz. I can hit, a little; I can't field at all. As soon as they saw me with the leather, the rest of the Gators (that's my team, in case you hadn't worked it out) took to calling me Dr. Strangeglove, after Dick Stuart, a notorious nonfielding first baseman with the Pirates and Red Sox back in the sixties. I have to say I earned the name.

So when we go out there, I'll catch some of the time. That's pretty safe for the team — there's no stealing in slow-pitch. If we're way ahead or way behind, I'll get in for an inning or two at first. Mostly I'm a designated hitter. The leagues we play in (a lot of beer leagues, come to that), all fifteen guys on the team get to hit, even if only ten can be on the field at any one time.

I'm also our official scorer, statistician, what have you — damn sight

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better at that side of the game than playing, worse luck. And at beer and pizza, I'm a champ. That's as important as the game, just about.

Besides, my girl thinks I look good in the uniform.

Which is more than I can say for some of the Gators who are nine times the ballplayer I'll ever be. Joe Humphreys, our real first baseman, looks like an avocado with a beard in his dark green softball togs. And Stuart Boileau at short is skinny enough to be a lizard. He has this habit of licking his lips all the time, too, which doesn't hurt the image. Once, at Shakey's, we ordered him a pepperoni-and-bugs pizza. If they would've served it, he would've eaten it.

All of which brings me round by easy stages to the oddest-looking ballplayer I ever saw. This was at the start of last year's spring leagues, and my Gators were in deep Bandini. A couple of guys have been transferred out of state since last fall, and two or three more were working nights for a while. We were plain strapped for troops. A bare ten had shown up for our opener, and our archrivals, the Tomcats, trounced us, 14-5.

I didn't exactly cover myself with glory in that game, either. I was a fat oh for three, though I got on my last time up when their pitcher embarrassed himself by throwing my comebacker eight feet over the first baseman's head. I razzed him as I stood out there, and he gave it right back. "That's the only way you'll ever reach against me," he said, which was near enough true that I shut up.

After me came our leadoff hitter. Stuart did us proud with a sharp single to center. Like an idiot, I tried to go to third on it, even though the other guys had a fellow with a rocket for an arm out there. Gave it all I had — headfirst dive into the bag. Well, actually shoulderfirst — something went *crunch-pop* when I hit. "Ouch!" isn't what I yelled. I jammed it good. My right arm was in a sling for the next couple of weeks.

To add insult to injury, I was out.

Sling and all, I showed up at the park next Tuesday night. Even if I couldn't play, I liked hanging around with the guys — and I can drink left-handed.

It didn't look like there was going to be a game, though. Only nine of us were there, counting me, which you shouldn't. You're supposed to field ten in softball, but it's legal to go out there with nine. Eight or fewer and you forfeit. "Where's Roy?" I asked Wes Humphreys, Joe's little brother (he's only six-three) and our manager.

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"Called me this afternoon — he's got the flu. Sounded like hell."

"Bad." Without Roy, we didn't have a prayer of fielding a team. And with a forfeit, we'd be two games back of the Tomcats right off the bat. In a ten-game season, that's death.

Wes knew all this better than I did. He hates losing, and won't take it lying down. So now he called to this fellow sitting in the bleachers watching us loosen up: "Hey, man! You play this game?"

"Me?" The guy looked startled. "A little, maybe." He had an accent that wasn't Spanish. Not a good sign, if we were after a ballplayer.

Well, he had to foreign, or else the melting pot had gone and melted down. I'd noticed him watching us the week before, too. I couldn't help it. He was a medium-dark, medium-heavy black guy, maybe thirty, but his hair — he cornrowed it, very neatly — was Irishman red, I mean flaming, and hung past his shoulders. He wore a mustache and goatee that were even brighter. I went to high school with a Japanese kid who spoke pure, hush-ma-mouf Arkansas — turned out his folks had been resettled there during the war, and stayed awhile afterward. He jolted me every time he said something. Looking at his guy now was like that — his hair and his hide spectacularly didn't match.

Wes would have taken him if he were a giant panda with chocolate feathers. "Come on down!" he said, waving. "We've got open roster slots. You can join us for the season if you want, or sign up and then duck out after tonight — we'll have more people here next week. Whatever you want."

Wes is a good talker. He has to be. He sells glassware for a living. You could see the guy thinking it over. Finally he shrugged and ambled on over to us. He didn't have a uniform, of course, but his clothes were grubby enough to play in: faded Levi's, a Coors T-shirt, and beat-up running shoes. About what we wear to practice.

He said his name was Michael, with a bit of a guttural on the "ch." He shook hands with everybody (left-handed with me), then Wes dug our ancient spare glove out of the bottom of his duffel bag.

Michael hadn't been stretching when he said he played "a little." He lunged awkwardly for balls when he was playing catch, blocked grounders with his shins or his feet as often as he fielded them cleanly. He threw from the elbow, girl style, not too straight. I could see Wes regretting things already, but Michael was a warm body, anyhow; and catching,

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he wouldn't be all that much worse than I was.

When it was Michael's turn to hit in our warm-ups, Wes, who was pitching BP, waved him to the plate. He looked worse up there than he had in the field. He stood straight up and down, with his left foot so far in the bucket it wasn't ever pointing at third base: more like at our dugout off third. He held his bat at a funny angle, with his hands a couple of inches apart. Yeah, I know Ty Cobb did the same thing, but Ty Cobb's grandmother had to be a more stylish hitter than this Michael.

Wes gave him a nice, fat pitch to hit. He took a clumsy swing, missed. He muttered something under his breath and tossed the ball back. Next pitch, he hit a little ground ball that dribbled between Stuart at short and Pete Sadowski, our third baseman: a hit, sure enough. Not impressive, but it'd look like a line drive in the box score, as the saying goes.

"Attaboy!" Wes yelled.

Next pitch was another clean miss. Michael took the one after that, then hit a bloop just past first that Joe couldn't quite reach. In a game, that would have been a double. Then a grounder straight at Pete on third, except it hit a pebble and kicked away from him. Another miss. Then a pop fly over Stuart, but too short for the outfielders. Then a big bouncer right at Stuart — but on the last hop, it flattened out and went between his legs. Then another bloop that sent Joe puffing down the line. He couldn't catch that one, either.

This must have gone on for another five minutes. Every so often Michael would miss, and those incandescent cornrows would fly as he shook his head in annoyance. But when he hit it, it would be one little bleeder or bloop or bad hop after another. Nothing like art, but nothing like outs, either. Finally our left fielder, Ted Canter, who was far and away the best athlete on the team, slid six feet on his belly to snag one of those pops maybe two inches off the ground.

"Good catch!" Michael shouted. He tossed the bat to somebody else.

Nobody said anything for a few seconds. We weren't quite sure what we'd seen, or what to make of it. Wes stood on the rubber, scratching his head. At last he said, "Remind me not to play poker with you, man. You'd probably draw four to a ten and end up with a royal flush."

"Yeah, Flush!" Pete yelled, so Michael got his nickname. He smiled, and looked a lot younger. He was pretty sober most of the time.

We let the other team have the field for their warm-ups. They were an

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outfit called Snafu. They played like their name a lot of the time, too. Still, they were pretty cocky, seeing us short a guy. We gathered round Wes while he made out the lineup sheet. He was still scratching, trying to figure out where to bat Michael. On form he deserved to hit last, but if all those hits were legit, he was a clear third hitter. Wes finally compromised and put him sixth.

It turned out to be a busy sort of game. Snafu got two runs in the first and another four in the second. Michael got knocked ass over teakettle in a play at the plate. The throw was high, and as he went up for it, the runner, a big Samoan built like a linebacker, cut the legs out from under him. He was safe; Michael never did get the ball. He found it and threw it back to Wes.

"Way to hang in there, Flush," Wes said, nodding. Michael just dusted himself off and went back into his crouch.

We were hitting, too, scoring as fast as Snafu. I was in a 1-0 slow-pitch game once, but most of them aren't like that. We finally won this one 13-11 when Snafu made back-to-back errors, the first one with the bases loaded, in the last inning.

Michael? Damned if he didn't go four for four: a soft liner over second, another one of those dinkers back of first (though he got thrown out trying to stretch that one), and a couple of ground balls with eyes. The second one started our big rally; he scored a couple of runs, in fact.

At Shakey's afterward, Pete got a pitcher of Bud and set it in front of Michael. "You got a choice, Flush," he said, as threatening as you can be with a big grin on your face. "Tell me you'll be back next week, and you can drink it. Otherwise I'll pour it over your stupid head."

"When do we play?" Michael said. We all cheered. It got pretty drunk out. That's an advantage early games have — they give you more time to party afterward. I remember asking Michael what he did.

He thought about it. It took a few seconds; he had nothing against beer. Finally he said, "Some of this, some of that. I spend a lot of time looking."

I backed off in a hurry. "Say no more." I'd been unemployed not too long before that. A bad feeling.

By the next game, I had that miserable sling off, thank God — ever try to bathe in one? I'm glad I wear a beard. Shaving left-handed is something I'd sooner not think about. I was still combing my hair that way, though. The arm wasn't ready for anything serious. It twinged whenever I lifted it higher than my shoulder.

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We had enough people there this time, and Wes made Michael a DH. He was awful shaky in the field. He knew it, too, and didn't say boo. But in warm-ups he put on another hitting show. He looked terrible up there, but he wasn't making any outs.

Wes threw his hands in the air. "All right, I'm convinced!" He batted Flush third. It worked, too. He was up three times, got three more cheap but effective hits, and we won again. Not only that, for once Snafu kept their act together for a whole game and knocked off the Tomcats, so we were tied with them again. Even the postgame pizza wasn't as greasy as usual. A fine week.

I was up for the next game. We had some momentum, we were going against another weak team — a gang called the Mother Truckers — and I was well enough to play. My arm still grumbled, but I could use it. To make sure I didn't hurt it again, I went through warm-ups doing just what I would have done anyway: throwing knuckleballs.

Typical of me, to have my baseball talent be absolutely useless. What good is someone who can throw a knuckler only with a slow-pitch ball? But I've got a mean one, if I say so myself. And a knuckleball is the easiest thing in the world on your arm. Look at Hoyt Wilhelm or Phil Niekro or Charlie Hough — big leaguers all, well into their forties.

A knuckleball comes up to the plate (or to whoever's trying to catch it) with about as much oomph as a marshmallow. But if you've thrown it right, you've killed almost all the spin on the thing, and every tiny little air current can have fun with it as it flies.

If you're a batter, it's like a drunken moth heading your way. It'll dance. It'll float. It'll shimmy. The best one I ever threw seemed to stub its toe halfway there, and hop on one leg the rest of the way. Marvelous fun. Hitters have no idea what it'll do next. That's fair; neither does the guy who threw it. Catchers hate it — they can't handle it, either.

Trouble is, sometimes it doesn't knuckle. Then it might as well be batting practice. Think of a hanging curve, only more so.

Tonight, though, playing catch with Pete, I had a good one. He caught it the first time I threw it, barely; it looked like a scoop of ice cream sitting right at the top of his glove. "Damn thing has the staggers," he said, and fired it back to me, harder than I can throw even when my arm's fine. My mitt popped. My hand started burning.

But I had my revenge. Pete's a pretty fair ballplayer. He caught most of

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what I threw, lunging and stabbing and guessing which way the rabbit would hop. But he dropped a couple, missed one clean and had to chase it, and took one right in the leg. It's hard to hurt anybody with a knuckler, especially with a slow-pitch ball, but he did the Stanislavski routine, yelling and bouncing up and down and generally making an ass of himself.

When he was done with that nonsense, he flipped the ball to Michael, who was next to him loosening up with Ted. "Here, Flush," he said, "trade places with me. This bastard" — which was the nicest thing he'd called me since I plunked him — "throws like you hit."

One of Michael's gingery eyebrows went up. "Really?" he said, and threw me the ball. He was better than he'd been a couple of weeks before, starting to get his whole arm into it.

But with that funky old glove he was still using, he couldn't have hung onto the first knuckler I gave him if he were Johnny Bench. I was proud of it. It wobbled seven different ways, and the last one caught him right in the chest.

He picked up the ball and looked at it as if it'd taken a bite out of him. "Do that again," he said, like he didn't believe what he'd seen. He couldn't've picked a better way to flatter me. The next one wasn't as good. It broke only once, but down and away, and zigged under his glove and past him.

He ran after it, hard, burned it back to me — mustard on it. If he ever learned to throw right, he'd have a good arm. "How do you do that?" he said.

It made me proud. "Mind over matter," I told him grandly, flexing what passes for my right bicep.

His eyes got big and round. They were a light, golden brown, an interesting color. "Let me have another one."

Hell, I'd throw that thing all night if somebody'd catch it for me. I give him credit: he fought it all the way, catching the ones that didn't knuckle too much, even a couple of good ones, getting his glove on most of them. But several got by him, and I'm afraid I nailed him a few more times, the last one in a tender spot. Knuckleball or not, he doubled over.

So did Pete, but he was laughing. "Ohh, that stings!" he sang out in falsetto.

Wes came rushing over. He wasn't mad at Pete. He was mad at me. "Don't you go racking Flush up, Dr. Strange," he growled, and he meant

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every word of it. "He's worth more to this team than you'll ever be, you goddamn clown."

"Do not blame him," Michael said when he could talk again. "That is a remarkable talent he has, and the ball eluded me time after time. Pete is right: I think he does pitch like I hit."

"Remarkable, my left one," Wes snorted. "You O.K.?"

"Yes, yes." Michael sounded impatient. It was about time to play; we started crowding into the dugout. Michael slapped me on the back. "Congratulations. I doubted your people could do such a thing."

"Huh?" I said, but just then Stuart flied out, and Michael had to go out on deck. When he came up, he singled between second and first — nobody'd got him out since he joined us. He promptly scored when Wes's brother Joe boomed one past the center fielder. He tried to stretch it into a triple, slid hard into the Mother Truckers' third baseman, and they started wrestling. Joe's all right off the field, but he plays rough. He picked on somebody his own size; that third baseman had "Whale" lettered on the back of his shirt. Both benches emptied. We managed to pry 'em apart without any punches getting thrown.

In the fun and games, I forgot about Michael's peculiar remark. I didn't make anything much of it, anyway. He had the same right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of weirdness as any other Gator.

Sure enough, he ended up going three for three: two rollers and a humpbacked liner nobody could reach. We won; I think it was 8-5.

At Shakey's afterward, I remembered again. "Hey, Flush," I said, and looked around for him.

"He took off, man," Ted told me. "Gulped a beer and split. Probably afraid you were gonna clunk him some more."

"Smartass. Something I wanted to ask him. Oh well, if I think of it, I'll catch him with it next week."

But when next Tuesday rolled around, Michael didn't show. He hadn't called; he hadn't left word. He just wasn't there. Wes cussed me up one side and down the other. He had no more idea than I did whether it was my fault, but he took no chances. And when we lost — nobody hit a lick — he reamed me all over again. He plain hates to lose.

Michael didn't come back, either, and it took us a couple of games to get used to having him gone. We lost one of those, and then lost to the Tomcats again, and ended up tied for third with Snafu. Lord, Wes was furious.

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We played in two summer leagues, then a fall one, then took a rest for winter — Sun Belt or not, it's too damn cold. Life went on. Joe got married (again); Wes got divorced; Ted's wife had twins; Pete got busted for drunk driving and spent a night in jail.

We were going to get together last week for our first spring practice, but it got canceled, of course — that was the day the aliens showed up. God knows how they did it from somewhere out around the orbit of Uranus, but they sent every country their message in its own number one language.

Naturally, you saw the one who was talking to us here in the States the same way I did. Humanoid, sure, but not from here, even if he did wear a pin-striped three-piece suit (to reassure the natives, I suppose): not with elephant-gray skin and bright blue hair. Those first few awful seconds, with everyone wondering whether they were going to blow us away, I was too freaked to notice that he cornrowed it.

Then I saw a couple of the others going back and forth behind him. They were a little out of focus, but brown skin and brick-red hair isn't a combination you forget in a hurry. "Ohmygod," I said, all one word.

The one in front started talking. His English had the same raspy accent as Michael's, but he knew how to handle himself in front of a camera. "I greet you in peace," he said, and you believed him. He had a presence Dan Rather would kill for.

"I greet you," he said again. "And congratulate you, and extend to you the invitation of the Confederacy of Sentient Beings to join our ranks. You have fulfilled the three criteria for membership. You have gained control of the atom. True, you use it in war, but your national struggles are over now. Yes, and this ship itself is armed. That is only proper: danger must be guarded against.

"You seek to explore space. A race without the curiosity to step outside its cradle is not worth knowing.

"And you have at last begun to master your own minds and use them directly, not merely through the clumsy mediation of the body." He glanced at something on the desk in front of him: whatever an alien uses for a paperweight, maybe. It lifted up about six inches and hung in the air. I didn't think it was special effects. What I thought was more like, *No wonder Michael was such a good place hitter.*

"Of the three," he went on, "this last is the key, for without control of

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the mind, no race can truly be said to be mature. We searched for it long in you, and began to fear you lacked it. Then one of our investigators" — remember how the picture cut away to a redheaded black man in a Gators cap? That's Flush, all right — "found a member of your folk using the talent in one of your games. Where it exists, it can be trained. We shall do this for you: it is the least we can do to welcome you among us. We will be landing soon, my friends. You are no longer alone."

The screen went blank after that, right? And you've seen the broadcasts since, everything we'll gain by joining this Confederacy of theirs: the trade, the ideas, far horizons when we'd almost forgotten what that meant. Everybody's going nuts celebrating the end of war, the end of poverty, the end of everything bad. I sure hope they're right.

But I'm a little worried. That "mature" thing Grayface was talking about. All I've been thinking of is that goddamn knuckleball and what it must have looked like to Michael, especially when he was used to shoving things around with his own mind and looking for evidence we could do it, too.

Well, "soon" is tomorrow now. But their ship is armed. They said so. I wonder what happens when they realize we *can't*.

Like I said, I'm a little worried.

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Roger Lovin is not a man to repeat himself, as evidenced by his recent contributions. Here he moves from SF with a Caribbean setting ("Where Do We Go When We Sleep," September 1989) to fantasy against the colorful background of the great fair at the King's city of Radimah-Duer.

SYLWANN'S CHOICE

By Roger Robert Lovin

THE GREAT FAIR AT RADIMah-Duer was well into its second ten-day, and still the people came. They came down the broad River Abb on big, clumsy rafts built at the cataracts far to the north, and up from the southern Holds in swift larets and lareteens, and in stately barges owned by the Temple and oared by sweating pilgrims. Here and there majestic j'dows swept upwater under gull-wing sails, come all the way from the Southern Seas and reeking of distant shores. All bound for Radimah-Duer, the King's City, the Jewel of the World.

Most came overland, though, inbound on the wayfares that crossed the wide plains of the Abbu-Jykkar, and down the Mainway from the far, dark mountain forests of the High Lutterines. They came in carts and wagons and on foot. They came to trade, but also to see and be seen, to marvel and be amused. For this was the Great Fair, held but once each three-year, and all the world would be in attendance.

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Among them were men of darker purpose. . . .

Traffic was heavy on the Mainway, the broad paved King's Road that tied Radimah-Duer to the Holds of the High Lutterines. It was especially heavy at Last Rise, beyond which stood the Tithe Gates and the high, lovely walls of the city itself. The jam of traffic was caused by first sight of Radimah-Duer, and by excitement, and by the preparations of small magics and last-minute bargaining strategies.

Yet in that confusion of oxcarts and pony traps and laden men atop shanks' mare, one wagon moved in a curious clearing, as if an unseen geas had been laid upon the space around it. It was a high-sided affair near o'erladen with cabinetry, carved trunks, and crafted woodworks.

Many pressed against the invisible barrier as if yearning to cross it, and as most of these earnests were male, the reason was not difficult to see. She sat atop the wagon's riding board, an extraordinarily beautiful girl of perhaps fourteen, with startling amber eyes and a delicate face framed in a blaze of copper hair. Though she was so wrapped in a woolsey Mountain Clans greatcoat that naught showed save hand and head, it was clear that she was a slim and finely wrought girl. Clear, too, that the commerce of sighs and liquid looks from below was not going unnoticed, for she made show of casually preening, of casting quick glances at this one or that from beneath long, lowered lashes.

Beside her sat a wiry old man as brown and gnarled as the kwu-wood burl at which he carved. He paid no apparent attention to the flirtations of his beautiful young companion or her would-be suitors, though it was obvious that he sat ward on the girl.

It was not this old man, however, whose presence kept the clear space round the wagon, nor yet the two boys, handsome twins of sixteen with tawny hair and open, mischievous faces, who paced beside the huge draft horse pulling the wagon. Nor, for that matter, a geas, though most in that traffic moved with some bit of ensorcellment, as their talents or purses permitted, about them. What kept the girl's would-be swains at bay was the man atop the horse, a grizzled giant in wolf-pelt kilts and knee boots, whose arms were leather sacks stuffed with rock, and who looked perfectly capable of splitting a boulder with the enormous double-bitted ax slung over his shoulder. His scowl, distributed generously, was all the geas his party needed.

Still, the girl was a pretty piece, and many a man and boy laid plans to

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chance across this family's trading stall ere sunwane, that monster atop the horse notwithstanding. The girl's coy smiles did not discourage them.

"Pay attention, Sylwann," the old man on the riding board said patiently. "The good student is not distracted. Now; for flux in sheep, give me Simples, Hand, and Spell."

Sylwann Torsenn sighed, the would-be scholar's universal lament. But she obeyed. "For Simples, Gran'ther, fluxbane and tincture of aramatica in solution, given at height of fever. For Hand. . . ." She made a complex motion, and for an instant, blue fires played about her fingertips. "And for Spell, *arpetath dap lo mordata.*"

"*Dep* lo mordata," Illf Torsennn corrected gently. "*Dap* is a calling command, not a holding one. You want to bind the malady, not bring it on yourself."

"*Dep,*" Sylwann repeated dutifully. "*Dep lo mordata.*" Then, frustrated: "I'm trying, Gran'ther Illf, really I am. But it's *hard!*" She cast a quick, wistful look at Last Rise, which they were just approaching. Unimaginable wonders lurked just beyond it.

"Hard it is, child," Illf Torsenn said sympathetically. "Hard indeed."

The twins, Horrl and Jorrl, had heard this exchange, and now dropped back grinning to pace beside the riding board. "Ho, Gran'ther Illf," Horrl called up. "Mayhap baby sister's interest is better held if you teach her how to snare one of these lovesick lackwits down here. Gods admit she'll find none back home, where her tongue is too well known."

"Yes," Jorrl added solemnly, " 'tis known that it was Sylwann's tongue that clabbered all the milk in the Hold last winter. Let us make offering at the Temple that there is a deaf man among these would-be suitors, lest *we* have to feed her all our lives."

Sylwann's cheeks reddened, and a dangerous fire came into her amber eyes, but she regarded her brothers and their familiar taunt with exaggerated disdain. "I'll give you tongue, you louts, and perhaps a lesson in the Deep Knowledge in the bargain. How do you think you'd look with extra noses? Or *without* a part or two? Considering what toads you are, that would be small loss for the womenfolk of the Clan — and from what Ithwenn the milkmaid tells me, 'small' is the right word."

Jorrl favored his sister with a look of mock pity. "I'd not mention 'small,' if I were you."

Stung, Sylwann drew her greatcoat more tightly around her just-

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budding breasts and resorted to her ultimate defense. "Uncle Bear!"

Dort Torsenn swung round on the big horse and glared down at the boys through his massive gray beard. "Leave off, you two. I've enough problems with your sister as is. I don't need your torment added to it. And quit strutting for these filthy lowland scuts! Come you home poxed, and it'll be *you* Clan Torsenn has to feed forever."

The boys were not visibly impressed with this threat. "Not to worry, Uncle Dort. We've a mighty wizard in the family. A wizard-and-a-half if you count Sylwann. They'll put a fetch on whatever poxy ailments we encounter."

The gray giant scowled. "It takes more than chants and mumbles and bags of dried pig's guts to cure pox." Then, swinging farther round to include Illf and Sylwann in his displeasure: "Bad enough the Patriarch of the Clan plays at witchery. Worse that he 'prentices our only marriageable girl child into that knave's trade."

"Do not mock the Deep Knowledge," Illf said mildly, not looking up from his carving. "Nor Sylwann for studying it."

"She'd be better served learning how to clean house," Dort growled.

Sylwann straightened defiantly, as ready to confront her champion of a moment earlier as her brothers. "Is that so! Mayhap I choose a different lifepath than slaving after ignorant goatherds and grouchy old bears who haven't the manners to take off their boots when coming in from the pigsty! Mayhap I *will* become a wizard!"

"You will marry and give Clan Torsenn sons!"

"Oh, will I, now? How if I marry here, at the Fair? How if I find myself a rich merchant, or a noble Lord?"

In her choler, Sylwann did not see the quick look, part fear and part black rage, that Dort Torsenn cast at wiry old Illf.

"Enough, all of you," Illf said. And though he spoke quietly, and in gentle tone, the bickering stopped instantly. Then, directing their attention with his chin: "Look, we're topping Last Rise."

"Oh!" Sylwann cried, leaping down and running forward despite her uncle's bellowed orders to come back.

"Girls," cried Horrl and Jorrl in unison, dashing after Sylwann.

"Ward your sister, dammit!" Dort Torsenn yelled. Then, his face hardening, he swung down off the horse and up onto the riding board beside Illf, his weight causing the laden wagon to list alarmingly. He regarded

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the old man a long moment, gravely silent, then spoke in the ancient formal tongue of the Clans. "Thou knowest, Patriarch, why we came again to this cursed ground."

Illf made a small gesture, indicating the crafted wood stacked behind them. "I come to barter the product of my labors," he said quietly. "And I counsel Thee against aught else for purpose, Clansman."

"Thy counsel be damned! My revenge lies here, and I will have it."

"Though it cost your life?"

"Aye, and Thine if need be, old man!"

Illf Torsenn carved patiently at his kwu-wood burl. "And how if it cost the life of our Treasure, whom you put at peril here without her knowledge or consent? Is Thy revenge worth such a price, Great Bear?"

There was ineffable pain in Dort Torsenn's face, but his eyes were obsidian. "Even that," he grated. "And I'll have no interference of Thee, Patriarch. Not of hand or heart, nor of Thy accursed spellweaving."

"I offer no interference, Dort. But there will be need of the Deep Knowledge if you hold to the terrible road you have set your will upon. There are fell magics in the High Temple, and dark men who own them." Then, gently: "as Thou knowest more than most."

The pain grew in Dort Torsenn's craggy face. "Where was Thy wizardry then, old fraud?"

"I was younger. Less skilled, less knowing. I am perhaps wiser now."

"So is he." Dort Torsenn lifted his eyes to Radimah-Duer, just coming into view as the wagon topped Last Rise, and glared bitter hatred at the black temple just visible over the city walls. "And he will sleep 'neath the Eternal Ice ere I leave this place. On my blood and soul!"

Then, as the wagon came abreast of her, he bent down and effortlessly scooped Sylwann, standing enthralled in the traffic, into his huge arms, and deposited her on his lap. "Stay with me," he ordered, "lest you're slighted away by these heathen lowlanders."

"I'm soul-warded by Gran'ther Illf, Uncle Bear," she said, squirming to peer in fascination at the King's City.

"It's not your soul I'm worried about. You, Horrl and Jorrl! Get back here!"

Radimah-Duer, the Jewel of the World! It lay behind its high, blue-tiled walls, a great crescent stretching a quarter league along the western bank of Abb. It was the heart of the King's Reach, and home to full

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eight thousands of people — if the exaggerations of the lowlanders of the Abbu-Jykkar were to be credited. And every three-year, when the Great Fair was held, all the people in the world, or so it seemed to Sylwann Torsenn's bedazzled eyes, gathered in the glory of the King's City. "Oh," she said softly, "it's wonderful!"

Dort Torsenn said nothing. But he crossed his huge arms about her as he clucked the horse into motion and took his party down the hill.

Queen's Gate, the high gate in the city wall, stood wide and welcoming. But before it were the Tithe Gates, set up each Fair, and these welcomed only such as were prepared to pay the Temple's Mite — and all else that could be light-handed or sorcelled from the unwary and unsophisticated. Tithe was collected by fat Temple Wardens backed by brass-hammed bullyboys considerably more hard-barked than the beribboned members of the Ceremonial Guard peacocking the walltops above Queen's Gate. These leather-buskined plugs were charged with collecting weapons, for it was Rule at the Fair that none go armed save during the nightly contests of strength and skill at weapons held for the King's pleasure — and bags of golden *mott*.

When Clan Torsenn's wagon approached, two of these rough-knockers regarded Dort Torsenn and the terrible ax he carried, and called for three reinforcements. Their relief was obvious when Dort surrendered the weapon without protest, after ensuring that he was marked entrant in the night's contests.

Meanwhile, Illf dealt with the Tithe Warden. Sylwann's faith in her grandfather's skill at the Deep Knowledge was justified when she caught the Warden trying to extort an unfair fee through petty spelling. His mouth asked for the standard two *mott*, but their ears heard five. Illf paid graciously, though only his eyes and Sylwann's noted that it was pebbles he counted into the Warden's pudgy, begemmed hand.

As they entered the city, they were required to give over their horse and wagon for stabling — at usurious rates — and to hire back-carters at even more outrageous fees to port their trade goods to the Woodcrafters' Green. Dark clouds gathered above Dort Torsenn, and great rumblings came from his chest. It was Sylwann who interceded in the potential confrontation. Accosting a beggar, she offered him a fair rate to gather members of his Guild and take port-work: it was clear that no protest would be lodged in Dort Torsenn's shadow! "There, Uncle Bear," she

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said: "That's the way to deal with people."

The gray giant snorted. "All right, then, get Thee off with Thy gran'ther — and mind that these miserable cutpurses you've hired don't shank it with our goods! And bargain us a good stall; I'll not haul Illf's butchered wood back up the Lutterines. Horrl, Jorrl, get away from that damned Sylathian! She's probably got whelps older than you!"

Sylwann needed no further urging, and, taking Illf's gnarled old hand, she dragged him off into the swirling kaleidoscope that was Radimah-Duer, at once the proud young beauty aware of her budding womanhood, and the gawk-eyed mountain child agog at the wonders around her.

Dort Torsenn watched her vanish into the noise and color, helpless love and protectiveness in his eyes. Then he raised his gaze to the Temple, on a hill in the center of the city, and his look was as black as that grim building's walls. "Zaxa," he hissed, baring square yellow teeth.

Sylwann clung to Illf's hand, all unconscious of doing so, as they made their way toward Woodcrafters' Green, that section of the citywide Fair reserved to those who artificed in wood. She tried to maintain the look of haughty amusement that she imagined a mark of the nobly born, but it kept giving way to astonishment. What wonders there were here! Magnificent horses bred solely for beauty, sleek as works of art, prancing for potential buyers. Enormous cats with fur striped like jagged lightning, leaping sullenly through hoops at the command of Khazbuk nomads, themselves near as wild as the cats, from the high, sere Chatt-Erd-Darr. Jugglers keeping a dozen wooden balls in the air at once. Monkeys like tiny men with trapped eyes, who could tell your future by turning a rune-card! Tattooed sailors with skins the color of tanned hide, selling spices that smelled of lands beyond the edge of the world. Gold and silver and polished gemstones; candlesticks and copper pots and — oh, the fabrics! The clothes! "Here, Gran'ther," she wheedled, pointing to an empty trade stall that, by odd coincidence, was next that of a leatherworker with a very handsome young apprentice.

"Woodcrafters trade on the Green, up the hill, there, by the Temple."

"I think we should stall here," she said, wistfully stubborn.

"The Fair Wards would come along and whack our bottoms with their quarterstaves."

"They wouldn't dare!"

"Even so saucy a bottom as yours," Illf said, "or so old a one as mine."

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"Then Uncle Bear would thrash them," she said stoutly.

"A number, certainly, but not all. And even should he manage so noble a feat, the priests would confiscate our goods and declare us outlaw."

Sylwann's chin came up. "Then you and I would turn them into newts!"

"Alas, no," the old man said gravely. "However perverted, there's a great store of the Deep Knowledge among the priests of the Black Temple. And willingness to use it. Their powers are far beyond those of an old cabinetmaker and his not-particularly-adept 'prentice." He shook his head. "We'll stall where we're supposed to, Little Treasure, and content ourselves with the Small Arts of bargaining." Then he smiled teasingly. "Perhaps there will be a handsome boy or two among our customers."

"Hmmph," she said, not quite able to keep the hopeful look off her face.

They came to the Woodcrafters' Green, hard beneath the cold black walls of the Temple, and commenced shopping for a suitable trading stall. There were several available, emptied by crafters who had sold their goods and either departed home or were spending their profits in Radimah-Duer. Illf considered a small, plain stall, but Sylwann demanded a more commodious one with sleeping and eating quarters. "Are we so poor we must sleep on the ground like peasants?" she demanded.

"We *are* peasants," Illf said reasonably. "And we'll certainly be poor ones if we rent this palace disguised as a trading stall."

Sylwann set her jaw, threw back her greatcoat, pushed up her sleeves, and fixed a hard eye on the stall's Lease Warden, a species known throughout the realm as the Temple's Rats. "Leave this to me."

With scold and bluster, flirt and determination, she bargained the stall for a third of the rate the Lease Warden demanded. And if she did not see the small Hands that Illf made behind her, nor hear his low incantations, neither did she know that these but countered those of the Rat: the deal she struck was fairly won with her own bargaining art.

Sylwann took immediate charge of the stall and set the beggars to unloading the Clan's goods — not over there! That goes in the back! — then began preparing an enormous lunch. Dort and the twins arrived in the midst of this, and Sylwann immediately press-ganged the boys' dubious help as kitchen scullions. Dort got out while he could, going to help Illf arrange the trade goods, up in the display area. Illf laid out the beautiful work his skilled old hands had made, and carefully gave choice space to the simpler pieces the twins had built, causing them to swell with pride

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despite the embarrassment of their momentary employment.

It became apparent why Sylwann had prepared so large a meal when she sat the beggars, who had been waiting in varying degrees of patience to be paid, and fed them. This simple and unaccustomed gesture of kindness took them aback, and each bowed deeply on leaving, addressing her as *Harr*, or Noble Lady.

"Queen of the beggars!" Jorrl hooted, making an exaggerated leg to her.

"Better that than kin to such as you two — and get on with scrubbing those pots."

While the youngsters worked, Dort stood in the stall's display area, watching the passing crowd. "Sylwann will bargain?" he asked Illf.

"If you mean, will she be up here where she can be seen?, the answer is yes. But not by Zaxa. He'll not pass among the common people."

"No, but he'll have ferrets who will."

Illf was pensive. With the trade goods arrayed, he had once again taken up the kwu-wood burl and commenced to carve. "I counsel you a last time, Dort: let this matter rest. What's gone cannot be brought back."

"Just do your part, Patriarch," the giant said grimly. "I ask no blood of Thee."

With the meal over, the sleeping furs laid out, and the woodcraft properly displayed, Clan Torsenn was established at the Fair. Dort at last gave the twins leave to kite off on their own adventures, but only after strong admonitions against wagering on games of "chance" and bantering with testy men, for though it was Rule to go unarmed, few at the Fair went about without some small but deadly weapon secreted on their person. "And do not frequent the stalls of the harlots!" But he spoke to empty air, for the boys were off at heels'-best speed. Then he, too, left, giving as purpose a desire to scout the competition for the night's games. Sylwann was left with Illf, for it was Law of the upland Holds that a Clanswoman be present at all tradings, lest drink and braggadocio make the bargains — men being what they were. This suited Sylwann perfectly, for she loved trade and possessed what Dort referred to as "monger's fangs sharper than my damned ax." And besides, there were more handsome boys — and not a few men — passing the stall than she could possibly have seen on her own.

Business was brisk, and with Sylwann's talent for the deal and Illf's skill against cheater's small magics, it was also profitable. The woods of

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the High Lutterines, where the Kilted Clans had their Holds, were the finest in the King's Reach, and goods built of them were known for durability. Those of Clan Torsenn, and particularly those by Illf Torsenn's skilled and artistic hands, were especially prized and fetched heavy coin. Tables of roghwood slat, cunningly fitted and polished to gleaming perfection, brought as much as a hundred *mott*. Carved chests and sturdy waybaskets sold as soon as displayed. Caskets for women's baubles and babe's cradles made of withy, soft and flexible as ortwork, but strong to serve the babe's babes, went with no haggling. Homey spoons and ladles, mugs and bowls of star pine, ax and spear hafts. All went into wagon and backpack, the produce of three years' skilled labor disbursed for heavy gold and bound for the four corners of the world. By sunwane there was no longer need for Dort Torsenn to fear having to cart anything back up the Lutterines. But another day and even the lesser products of the twins' earnest work would be sold.

Two major pieces, though, remained, for their price was beyond all save priests and nobles. These were the wonderful, intricately carved holdfire boxes that the master carvers of the High Clan made from the knobs and burls of the kwu tree. It was a lifetime's work to see into the swirls and eddies of those burls, and a lifetime's skill to extract with knife and patience and art the shapes that hid therein. And of the master carvers of the Clans, none equaled Illf Torsenn, whose eye saw universes in the warts and knobs, and whose hands could bring them forth.

But it was not for their beauty alone that the boxes were prized. Kwu, alone among woods, had the property of holding fire almost indefinitely while neither burning nor charring, and of admitting just enough of the world's breath to keep the coals from starving. On frozen mountain, in hostile desert, or aboard far-bound j'dow, fire often meant the difference between life and death, and men had killed to possess a holdfire box. For this reason the boxes were constructed as mazenests, so made that to try and open them by force would crush the coals they held. The secret of each box's working was sold with it, and the cost was a Lord's ransom. Illf Torsenn had made two in the thirteen years since the Clan had been to the Fair, and had been working on a third for the past four years. It was this last piece at which he had been so patiently carving all the long journey to Radimah-Duer. It was his masterpiece.

"May I see, Gran'ther?" With their goods sold and sunwane having

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taken the crowds, some to Temple and others to the city square where the contests-at-arms would shortly begin, Sylwann was reaved of both admirers and potential trade victims, and was restless.

"Of course," Illf said, passing her the fist-sized burl, watching her closely without appearing to do so as she studied it.

She turned it round and round appreciatively. Its entire surface was covered with incredibly minute carving, so artfully done that when you looked at a given swirl this way, it was a leaping deer, and from that way a woman bathing in a stream. "It's beautiful, Gran'ther," she said simply.

"Thank you. Do you think you can riddle it open?"

Sylwann studied the box with serious concentration, then began pushing and pulling at it. When half a candle's effort had seen her open only the first, outermost chamber, she handed it ruefully back to the old man. "Your sorcellment is beyond me, Gran'ther."

"No sorcellment," he said gently. "Just great patience and long thought. Here, watch." Deftly, he reduced the holdfire box to seven ever-smaller mazenests, the innermost being the fire chamber. And though the chamber was barely large enough to take the end of Sylwann's little thumb, three of its four sides were carved with tiny but perfectly recognizable faces.

"That's Uncle Bear," Sylwann said in astonishment. "And this is you, facing him. But who is this woman on the side between you?"

"Your mother, Sylwann."

For a long moment the girl was silent, studying the tiny carved face as if to sear it into her memory. "She was lovely."

"Yes. Like you."

Sylwann's face grew hard. "I'll not have the life she had. Going nowhere, learning nothing, dying in birthing me." Then, fiercely: "I'm going to see and do everything, Gran'ther Illf! I'm going to marry a great Lord and travel the world!"

"And what of your studies?" he asked quietly. "Will you give over the Deep Knowledge?"

She looked unhappy. "I don't know, Gran'ther. It isn't a fair choice."

"Few are."

Sylwann avoided the old man's eyes. "Why is the fourth side blank?"

"I'm not finished yet," he said reasonably, taking the box back. Then, smiling: "Dress now, child. We'll promenade the Fair, then join Dort

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and the boys at the Temple for Pilgrim's Blessing."

"Oh yes, Gran'ther!" Then, hopefully: "May I wear my lace blouse?"

"If you wish. But you will not stuff kerchiefs in the bodice."

She blushed, her chin coming up defiantly. "Horrl and Jorrl fill the cods of their smallpants with straw — or so Ithwenn the milkmaid swears."

"Yes," Illf said. "Children do like to brag." He managed to get a great deal of amused condescension in the word "children," and smiled quietly as Sylwann thought about it and nodded agreement, one adult to another.

Tepp, creator of all the world, of the demons of the air and the Eternal Ice below, was not a particularly foreboding god, and, in the early history of the King's Reach, had been seen as a lover of wine and flowers and laughter. But there had been a faction among his early priests and acolytes more interested in retribution than redemption — men narrow of heart and outlook, secretive men, delvers into the question of power. They had adopted the once-honorable black robe of the scholar and set themselves upon the quest of Deep Knowledge. And gradually, as fear of them rose, so, inevitably, did their power, until the garlanded bower of Tepp became the closed room, the dark and formal church, and finally the Black Temple. Where once had been the sweet smell of honeysuckle and the laughter of babies, there was now the acrid stink of perverted Knowledge and the screams of the Lost, echoing up from the labyrinth in the bowels of the hill. Oh, the rituals were still observed, the hosannas still sung, the blessings still given. Now, however, they were mandatory.

The Temple was lit with a thousand high tapers, the Blessing Altar itself ringed with a hundred. Yet there seemed no more light in the black stone building than if it stood open to a sickle moon. Dort, Illf, and the three children — all that remained of Clan Torsenn — shuffled toward the altar as part of a thick, glutinous human snake: some few parts pious believers; most skeptical, wary, or, like Great Bear Dort Torsenn, openly, contemptuously hostile.

Horrl and Jorrl moved in abashed silence, a little awed and visibly uneasy. Neither had ever seen a building this size, let alone been inside one. Sylwann was awed, too, though for entirely different reasons. Gilded balconies hung above the Temple floor, and in them sat the wealthy and highborn of the King's Reach. They looked, Sylwann thought, aching to be among them, like splendid and dangerous hawks in their rich finery. It did not occur to her that hawks are birds of prey.

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Illf Torsenn was not awed. He was deeply fearful, for himself and his Clan. To his trained eye, the Temple was blindingly bright, lit with the actinic sear of Deep Knowledge. How feeble his own small lantern seemed!

Dort bent to growl in Illf's ear. "Where is he? The bastard's not up there."

"His ferret is," the old man said quietly. "That pockmarked man in the second tier. He lolled about our stall all afternoon."

"He saw our Treasure?"

"Could he have not?"

"Well and good," Dort said with grim satisfaction. They'd reached the golden rail around the Blessing Altar. An obsequious priest held out his hand for coin before marking their foreheads with the sacred ash. Dort spat in the hand.

Supper was unexpectedly rich. Clan Torsenn returned to its stall to find a whole roast pig on their table, though the stall's locked and ensorcelled door was untouched. "So much for your spellcasting," Dort said, almost with satisfaction. A brass beggar's bowl lay near the pig, turned upside down in the universal mendicant's gesture of thanks. Sylwann gave the twins a triumphant, superior smile, but they didn't notice. Jorrl had brought home a leggy hide-tanner's daughter, and Horrl, drunk on short-beer and his own magnificence, had snared an older woman who would look considerably less attractive in the morning. "Make sure they wash," Dort grumbled, but sat them nonetheless.

There were mixed emotions at the table. The boys were full of themselves, loud and ebullient. Illf was pensive, eating as if not tasting his food. Sylwann was annoyed, for Dort and Gran'ther Illf had refused to let her accept any of the numerous requests for her company she'd received during the day. "Time enough for that later," Illf had soothed on their way back from the Blessing. "We'll promenade while Dort and your brothers contest." But she'd been unmollified, and remained so. And Dort Torsenn ate in stony, withdrawn silence.

Abruptly, with the meal barely over, he shooed the visitors out with promises to send the young heroes along later, and quelled the boys' lamentations of protest with a look guaranteed to cause sterility. "We go to contest for our pride and the Clan's purse. You lads will wrestle, and I will try myself at fist and ax." Then, for their ears alone: "Fetch away with me. There's serious business afoot."

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"Fetch away" was a Clan war command, and the boys sobbered on the instant, following him out into the night. "How serious, Sire?" Horrl asked.

"That depends on how well you've learned to fight," Dort replied in deadly earnest.

While Sylwann set herself annoyedly to clearing dinner's wrack, Illf went out and returned with a bathseller, who set his big copper tub near the table and had his 'prentices fill it with steaming, scented water. Illf paid him and bade him return for his tub ere high moon. Then he smiled at Sylwann, who'd been giving him dirty looks. "For you, child." As she squealed in surprised delight, he placed three large candles on the stall's back wall and lit them for her, then left her to her pleasure. A curtain separated the stall's living quarters from its trading area, so that folk could watch their goods while they were in the back. Illf lowered this to give Sylwann privacy, then laid a simple spell upon it, proofing it against sound. Then he opened the stall's trade shutters, signifying that he was at trade with his few remaining pieces. He sat himself on a high tradesman's stool and laid his hand briefly on a worn black book nearby, closing his eyes as if in prayer or deep thought. "Let me be strong," he whispered. "And skillful."

Shortly a pockmarked face drifted past the stall. Candlelight played on the back curtain, offering the flickering outline of a young girl bathing. A few moments later, several bullyboys appeared and quietly cleared the area, then unceremoniously closed the stall's shutters again without bothering to ask Illf's permission. Almost immediately a thin, darkly handsome priest stepped into the stall. "Good eve to you, Master." His voice was smooth and cultured. "I would see your wares."

Illf stood and made a leg. "Good eve, Blessed One. Tepp has smiled on me today, so that most of my poor goods are sold away. But such as I have left, round about you here, are available. Might I offer these nesting tables for your consideration? They were made by my grandsons, and are sturdy."

The priest made show of examining the tables, but without enthusiasm. "I am interested in something more . . . rare."

Illf held out the lesser of his two kwu-wood holdfire boxes. "This, then, of my hand. It was years in the making and, if I may boast, is as cunningly contrived and difficult to unlock as, say, the labyrinth that is rumored to exist beneath the Temple."

The priest gave him a flickering look. "Ah yes. There are those rumors.

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"It is said, Blessed One, that the Temple punishes those who . . . transgress . . . with a sorcellment that dooms them to wander the labyrinth forever, unable to see its doors. It is said that many among the priestly and highborn cast their, ah, unwanted toys into the labyrinth."

The priest studied him a long moment. "If you believe that rumor," he said carefully, "then you are a man with a bold tongue."

Illf made a deprecating gesture.

The priest's eye had seldom strayed from the curtain, and Sylwann's shadow upon it, since entering the stall. Now he set down the holdfire box and stared openly. "What have you back there, I wonder, my bold woodcrafter?"

Illf shrugged. "Naught but a girl child, Blessed One. Scarce befurred as yet, and certainly unworthy of your attentions."

The priest smiled thinly. "All are worthy of the attention of Tepp the Righteous. I would view this girl."

Illf put on an ingratiating face. "She is shy, Blessed One, unused to the ways of men in the world. I fear to upset her."

The priest regarded Illf with calculating eyes. "You folk of the mountain Clans seldom do anything to small purpose. I wonder why you've brought this young flower to a place where she is so likely to be plucked?"

"Only to teach her the skills of trade, Blessed One. Of good exchange for . . . whatever is being sold."

"Ahh," said the priest. He gestured without looking round. The pockmarked man appeared immediately. "Give the good Master five gold *klon*."

"Blessed One! The child is not for sale!"

"I wish only to look upon her. Ten *klon*."

Illf wrung his gnarled hands and rolled his eyes. Then he snatched the heavy gold coins, each worth a year's labor, and caused them to vanish in his kilt. "An instant only, Blessed One," he wheedled. "And she must not know that you observe her."

The priest smiled, openly contemptuous now. He gestured his pockmarked minion out, then regarded Illf expectantly. Illf led him to the rear, held a cautionary finger to his lips for silence, and raised a corner of the canvas curtain.

Sylwann stood naked in the copper tub, laving her little breasts with scented water. Candlelight made her wet skin appear oiled, and her mane of copper hair gleamed.

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Illf held the curtain but a heartbeat, then dropped it.

The dark priest shivered with undiguised lust. He took Illf by the elbow and led him back to the front of the stall. "I would confer upon this child of the Lutterines a rare honor, Master. And, of course, reward her in the bargain. Say, with twenty *klon* for her dower-purse."

"She is but a babe, Blessed One. Perhaps this is too great an, ah, honor for one so young, so . . . unused." He smiled blandly.

The priest's jaw set. "Fifty *klon*."

"One hundred. In advance."

The priest regarded Illf a long moment before snapping his fingers. "Give the good Master one hundred *klon*, Blart."

The pockmarked man's eyes widened, but he took out his ornate purse and carefully counted fifty two-*klon* pieces onto the stall's trade counter.

"Bring her to my tent at the games tonight. The red tent with no crest on its pennon." He turned to go, then paused, his eyes cold. "I will remember your face, old man."

"Blessed is Tepp the, ah, Merciful," Illf said piously, bowing how.

IF THE heart of the Great Fair lay in the trading greens, it soul lay in King's Square, a wide common at the foot of Palace Hill. Here each day were displayed and bartered the herd animals — goats and prize sheep, huge cows with spiral horns, heavy pigs, and the sleek horses that were the pride and joy of the King's Reach.

And it was in King's Square each night of the Fair that the contests-at-arms were held — in some ways the Fair's most important series of events. Men of brawn and reflex, of yeoman's eyes and infighter's shifty hand, came from every Hold of the Reach to try their prowess against each other and the King's Champions. Outlanders from nations round, their armor and weaponry as bizarre to a Holdsman's eye as his was to theirs, came for their pride and the pride of their nations. And the King's Generals watched thoughtfully, judging the temper of the Reach's manhood and the skill of potential foreign foes.

At this stage of the Fair, well into its next-to-last ten-day, the great champions had made their strut, some rising to glory and others moving down in the ranks, and the nightly contests were the provenance of the common folk, of those not quite prowessed enough to be taken as heroes, or, like Dort and some others, uninterested in the honor.

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Horrl and Jorrl, along with what appeared to be every youth in the Reach, took part in the wrestler's melee, a wild flailing of greased bodies that was the Fair's most popular — and by far its most hilarious — event. Much to his own surprise, Jorrl emerged as one of the event's three victors, and received fifty *mott* and a King's Laurel to compensate for his broken nose and the missing upper half of his right ear. Horrl had to content himself with a second place in the individual no-holds, and the comfort of knowing that — in his opinion, at least — it was an event requiring more skill than blind luck.

Dort competed in the Masters division of thrown weapons, an event requiring both strength and accuracy, its object being for the contestant to place as small a target as possible at as great a distance, and hit it. Dort, like most, started the rounds with a straw-stuffed hide shield placed at medium distance, intimidating the competition by putting his enormous double-bitted ax into it with such force that it split shield and mount alike and drove them several paces back. Wager odds changed all round the square.

By mid-eve'n the contest was in its final round and down to three contestants: Dort, an outland knife-thrower with snake's eyes, and one of the beggars Sylwann had hired as back-carter earlier in the day. This man, Chammar by name, wielded a laughably small bronze hatchet that he threw with careless grace.

The outlander, a man with some flair, carefully pinned to the mount a bright paper less than two handspans on a side, and ordered it carried fifty paces across the field. Then, to the delight and astonishment of the crowd, he pinned it neatly with his knife.

When the mount was returned, Dort made show of tearing the outlander's paper in half, and ordered the mount carried seventy paces away. Bracing himself, he tensed his heavy muscles, took a deep breath, and let fly. The huge ax turned lazily, making a soft *shuck, shuck, shuck* sound as it turned above the square. Then — *thuk!* — it struck, clipping the corner off the half-square of paper. Dort let out his breath and grinned slowly as the crowd roared.

It took two men to lug the target mount back with Dort's great weapon buried in it. After Dort retrieved the ax, Chammar the beggar spoke loudly for the crowd's benefit. "I've not Thy arm, Great Bear. Perhaps no one has! So I must content myself with a lesser toss. "Fifty paces." Then, smiling he

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tore off the tiny corner of the target paper that Dort's ax had clipped, not a thumb's width in size, and pinned it to the target. Dort's jaw dropped, and the crowd fell into amazed silence.

At fifty paces the sliver of paper was barely visible. Chammar set himself, cocked his child's hatchet, and whipped it forward in a whistling blur.

It split the paper neatly in half. For a long second the crowd was silent. Then it exploded. "By Father Mountain's besweated balls!" Dort Torsenn roared, grinning admiration at the beggar. "I've never seen the like! With my arm and your eye . . . !"

Chammar bowed slightly, one equal to another, and left to collect the prize that was his by undisputed acclamation.

But the night was not over. The true contest, that for which half the Fair had gathered, was the handmatch, the contest of fist. It had been clear from midday that only two men would stand forth this night, for none of sane mind would challenge either of them. The first was Dort Torsenn, with chest like a wine keg and arms larger than most men's waists. The second was a monster of a Sylathian blacksmith who looked capable not only of shoeing Dort's mighty horse, but of carrying it back to Sylathia under either of the oak trees he used for arms. He was as good-natured as Dort was dour, but the scars on his big knuckles proved that he enjoyed a fight. There were few scars on his broad, ruddy face, though. "Well met, old mountain grizzly," he rumbled, offering a horn-calloused paw. "I'll not make the mistake of taking you lightly."

"Nor I you, Ironbender, if you're as hard as you look."

The blacksmith backed off a pace and raised his scarred battering rams. "Well," he grinned, "let's find out."

Dort swung and missed. The smith swung and did not. Dort found himself sitting down, not quite sure for a moment whether he really wanted to get up. But he did, bellowing, and the fight was well and truly joined.

Fall evenings here in the lowlands were not really cool enough to justify a greatcoat, but Sylwann wore hers anyway, primarily for the way its rough woolsey texture set off and — she hoped — drew the eye to her lace-frothed bosom. She had minded Gran'ther Illf's admonition against enhancing her charms with bombast, but he'd not proscribed leaving a

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catch-toggle or two undone, as if carelessly, to emphasize such cleavage as she had. Nor dressing her hair with scented sheep's fat to make it glow like burning, gold-shot copper. Nor against lining her eyes and coloring her cheeks and lips. It was as if he were, uncharacteristically, encouraging her to display herself.

But then, Illf Torsenn was himself uncharacteristically sartorial this evening, dressed in the impressive formal kilts and wolf-trimmed great-cloak of a Highland Clan Patriarch. And he carried with him the tall kwu-wood staff, small blue fires playing about its intricately carved top, of a Master of the Deep Knowledge. It was the first time Sylwann had ever seen him with it outside the rare Councils of Mages held in the dark forests of the Lutterines.

They strolled the Fair arm in arm, working their way toward King's Square, Sylwann in agonized frustration. It seemed to her, and was very nearly so, that every man and boy in the crowd cast covetous eyes in her direction. Certainly most of them bowed and made small gallantries, and the bolder presented themselves to Illf for introduction. He refused them all firmly but graciously, much to Sylwann's annoyance. "Patience," he counseled.

"Patience! To what end? It seems I am to spend the entire Fair ward-locked behind my grandfather's disapproval! No suitor good enough!" She adopted a tragic expression. "I shall die an old maid."

Illf Torsenn did not respond to her lament, for the greater part of his attention was, as it had been for some time, elsewhere. They had passed onto the fringes of King's Square, and now walked in a furtive darkness more emphasized than relieved by the small candles and hooded lanterns glowing from within the tents set up by the powerful to serve as head-quarters for whatever temporary adventures the Fair should bring. Traffic was thin here, and moved in silence. Sylwann became aware of this, and balked, intuitively uneasy. "Gran'ther?"

"How lovely the Fair is," he said, a strangely compelling note in his voice. "How bright and cheerful."

"Y-yes," she said, confused.

There was a tiny, almost inaudible *snap!* as energy discharged from the tip of Illf's Mage staff. "Look there, Sylwann. See how the feast is laid. See the golden platters, the rich food! And surely that is a young Lord beside the couch. See how he beckons you! Go to him, child. He is your swain."

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Smiling, her heart high, Sylwann went into the red tent.

They had battled the length and breadth of King's Square, the crowd surging back and forth with them. Here and there lay the odd spectator who hadn't been nimble enough to get out of their way; the oxcart wheel the Sylathian had splintered on Dort Torsenn's grizzled head; the corner post from the now-collapsed judge's stand, which Dort had uprooted and cracked across the blacksmith's massive back — to no visible effect. But even the gods tire, it is said, and both the Bear of the Lutterines and the Bull of Sylathia were panting and wobbling. The whole side of Dort Torsenn's face was swollen beyond recognition, and blood dripped from between all his square yellow teeth. The Sylathian's nose was red pulp, and one arm hung limp and useless. There wasn't an undamaged knuckle between the two giants.

The Sylathian feinted heavily, and Dort was so tired he fell for it, taking a hammerblow in the ribs that drove him to his knees. The blacksmith staggered back a pace, panting. "I'll give over the winner's purse if you'll just stay down, old grizzly. Damned if I've ever met your like!"

Dort spat blood, trying to get his eyes to focus. "Would you stay down?"

The blacksmith grinned through what was left of his mouth and helped Dort to his feet. "Have at you, then my fri—"

It was the only blow that Dort Torsenn had left in him, and, knowing that, he put all that was left in him in it. It came down from the Lutterines, that blow, picked up speed as it crossed the Abbu-Jykkar, howled into Radimah-Duer, screamed across King's Square, and exploded on the point of the Sylathian's granite chin. It would have killed three ordinary men or a prime ox.

The blacksmith just stood there, a look of mild surprise on his face. Dort Torsenn resigned himself to the embarrassment of being beaten to death in front of half the population of the world.

Then, ever so slowly, the blacksmith began to topple. He went down like a grandfather oak, with sober dignity, and he shook the ground when he struck. For a long moment, he was utterly still. Then he took a great, shuddering breath and began to snore heavily.

The square erupted into pandemonium. Dort found himself hoisted on a dozen shoulders and hustled across the square to what was left of the

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judge's stand to collect his purse of golden *mott*. "Let this go to yon Sylathian when he awakes," Dort told the judges. "For if I see him again, I intend to run away!" He limped off as the crowd applauded his humor and generous spirit, knowing that the honor his gesture would garner for Clan Torsenn was of greater value than a few *mott* of gold. And besides, the greater purse lay among the crowd, where Jorrl and Horrl had laid off wagers on his behalf.

And in any event, it was not the gold that concerned him now.

He took himself to the stall wherein armorers of the King's Guard warded the contestants' weapons. By apparent coincidence, the twins showed up there almost immediately. A heavy purse hung from Horrl's belt. "Where have you bedded my ax?" Dort demanded of the armorers. "If you've nicked it, I'll have your ears."

"Rest easy, ClanSire," a young armorer said, bringing the great weapon to the counter. "We've cared for this fine monster of yours as though it were our—"

Horrl's stiletto lay against his jugular. "Just bring that sword while you're at it, would you?" Jorrl was over the counter and back with swords and smallaxes in an instant.

"Before you goodmen think to make yourselves heroic, consider carefully whether you really *want* to catch Uncle Bear."

The looks on the armorers' faces showed that they had already had that thought.

Dort hefted his ax, finding the balance. "All right, boys," he said grimly. "Fetch away!"

SOMEWHERE MUSICIANS were playing sweetly on flutes and tambours. The perfumed candles had burned low. Sylwann lay on the gilded couch, languorous and breathless, her eyes almost closed, her neck arched back. The darkly handsome Prince, scarce older than herself, but worldly beyond his years, bent to her unbuttoned blouse, his tongue caressing the nipples of her breasts. Deep in her mind, a tiny voice shrilled, but she could not, somehow, heed it.

The beautiful Prince was moving on her, urgent and demanding, his hands somehow rough. She felt cool air on her thighs.

"Zaxa!"

For a confused instant, her vision blurred. The walls of the palace be-

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came red canvas, the gilt couch a mean pallet surrounded by menacing iron devices. And there was Uncle Dort, his bloody face terrible to see, his great ax swinging high.

She screamed, and the world became nightmare. It wasn't Uncle Bear charging across the palace room, but some great monster, a thing with horns and claws and fangs with which young Prince Zaxa fought desperately.

Then hands were upon her. Serving maids had appeared and were urging her away with soothing words, taking her to safety. But men fought them for her possession, men at one moment villainous of aspect, and the next — most astonishingly — with the faces of her brothers, Jorrl's with bent nose and torn ear. And, terrifyingly, the maidens trying to rescue her flickered like candle flames in a hot wind, becoming men in black robes wearing the horned heads of evil-eyed goats. She began to struggle, the voice in her head rising to a shriek. The maidens' hands tightened on her arms, pulling her toward the darkness.

Another hand was on her, a voice crying her name from a thin, far distance. "Hold fast, sister! Hold on to me!" And then she tripped and was falling, someone protectively atop her. The earth shuddered as mighty thunders rolled, and the air became a maelstrom of green-and-blue lightning thick with the stink of Deep Knowledge gone hunchbacked and malevolent. Even as she fell, a burst of actinic light, impossibly bright, filled the universe, searing an image into her brain. Dort Torsenn, his wild gray mane flying, his bloody face distorted with hatred, huge as all the demons of the Lutterine Mountains, locked in mortal combat with a dark shadow. And the shadow was her Prince grown older, harder, immensely powerful, wrapped about in an eerie black glow the shape of priestly robes. And beyond this shadow, somehow part of it, controlling it, was a creature of horror — for it, too, was her Prince. But it was *old.* Old beyond knowing, twisted and warted and bent with inexpressible evil. What had once been eyes were now red pits of damnation, and from them shot smokes and lightnings, bolts of rotted power thrown like curses against the figure who stood beside Dort Torsenn.

Illf MocMorrah Harr Torsenn, Patriarch of Clan Torsenn and High Mage of the Lutterine Convocation, stood wide-legged, wrapped in white flames, one arm raised over his head. A globe of orange fire roiled above his hand, and in the globe were the faces of long-dead Torsenn Clansmen. In his right hand, the Mage held his staff of power, and it seemed that it

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absorbed and deflected the reeking putrescence being thrown at it by the dark force across the tent. And in that seared moment as she fell, Sylwann saw the great Mage point the staff and cry aloud. "Zaxa! Thy evil take Thee!" And the light that leaped forth from Illf Torsenn's staff of power could not be borne by mortal eyes, and darkness took Sylwann.

Dort Torsenn ran through the dark streets of Radimah-Duer, his bloody ax in his great fist, his niece over his shoulder. Before him ran Horrl and Jorrl, and Illf came behind, trotting effortlessly for all his age. The hunt was up, and Clan Torsenn was the quarry. Bullyboys quartered the city, balls of priest-spawned witch fire accompanying them. Citizens and fairgoers alike, aware that something fearful had transpired, and feeling the stink of magic in the air, had made prudent retreat to home or tavern. Twice the Clansmen had barely found shadow in time to avoid being spotted by the King's Guard, and now had abruptly to throw themselves against a wall a third time. "Well, old fraud," Dort panted, "why don't you witch us o'er the damned city walls? It's obvious we'll not get out the gates."

"I seem to recall counseling against this adventure," Illf said mildly, studying the now-empty little square before them. "I smell trouble out there."

Horrl drew a resolved breath. "We can't stay here." He started across the square, the rest of the Clan behind him.

A dozen Guardsmen boiled out of a doorway. Dort shifted Sylwann on his shoulder and raised his ax. Before he could swing it, something the size of a draft wagon hit the Guardsmen like a boulder hitting ninepins, laying the lot of them motionless on the cobbles. Even with one arm limp and broken, the effort did not seem to tax the blacksmith overly much. He grinned at Dort and patted the prize-purse at his belt. "Would this set up a forge in the Lutterines, old bear?"

Dort laughed. "Things are going to be . . . lively . . . up there, once the cursed priests get organized. They'll not give up, Ironbender, and what you see of Clan Torsenn is its sum: the four of us."

"I hear the women of the mountain Clans are wide-hipped and appreciate a strong man."

"They are, and they do."

The smith's grin widened. "Five of us, then."

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Jorrl had disappeared during all this, and now came trotting back into the square. "We're hard by the river, Uncle Dort. We could try for a boat."

Dort Torsenn had a mountaineer's innate suspicion of water and things that purported to move upon it, but the eerie glow of a priest's witch-fire ball, passing near the square, helped him overcome it. They ran for the waterfront.

They were too late. All but one of the boats at the piers, a small lareteen, had been cast adrift. Between that boat and Clan Torsenn, a hundred Guardsmen packed the pier. At their head stood a fat, black-robed priest. His smile was as cold as the moonlight in which he stood. "Give over," he said, "and your dying will be easier."

"Yours won't," Dort said grimly, raising his ax.

"If you fight, ClanSire, the girl will be kept alive. For our . . . amusement."

The grizzled giant's face was a mask of rage and humiliation. There were a hundred men before him, and a third of them had crossbows. Not even he or the mighty blacksmith could take them all. And Sylwann must not be left to the cursed priests. If Clan Torsenn was to die here, then Sylwann would die first, honorably, at his own hand. He swung her off his shoulder, cradling her like a babe, and lifted his ax.

A little hatchet whistled out of the darkness behind him, grazed his beard in passing, and split the face of the priest on the pier. He staggered back a step and collapsed. The planks hissed where he touched them.

Dort whirled, crouching instinctively, ax at the ready. A ragged army of men, women, and children stood in the shadows. They were armed to the teeth. Chammar stepped forth. "We come to serve the *Harr*," he said simply, "the Great Lady Sylwann Torsenn."

The big laret moved steadily up the Abb, oared by twenty of the beggars of Radimah-Duer. Behind came two other vessels carrying the rest of the ragged army, one under command of Chammar, the other under Jhpher-Hornpalm, late of Sylathia.

Sylwann and Illf sat in the bow of the laret, with Dort standing spread-legged above them and scowling back at his tiny fleet. "By Father Mountain's hairy green balls," he swore, shaking his head. "Clan Torsenn, proudest in the Lutterines, peopled by cutpurses, footpads, whores, and a

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damned Sylathian who'll eat more than the horse herds — and the horses, too, if I don't keep him in line!"

"Good fighters, though," Illf said mildly, whittling slowly at the kwu-wood holdfire box he'd somehow managed to retain. He glanced sideways and smiled at the look of fierce pride that came across Dort's face.

"Aye," the gray giant said, unable to keep the happiness out of his voice. "A man could do worse for Clan." Then he stomped off aft, yelling at the gods-cursed street-rat thieves to keep the gods-cursed oar stroke even before he threw the gods-cursed lot of them over the boat wall or rail or whatever the hell you called it.

The morning was warm, the day bright, but Sylwann shivered within her greatcoat, and there was a darkness about her that had not been there yesterday. After a time she spoke. "I could have been . . . taken . . . by that man."

"Yes."

"Not just my body, but my soul."

"Yes. As he took your mother's body and soul, with you still a be-napped infant, and I an arrogant young wizard, full of my own power, who thought to control Zaxa's lusts and turn them to the Clan's profit." There was more bitter accusation in his voice than could ever have been heaped upon him by another. "Your mother was sixteen when Zaxa took her, and very, very old when he finally allowed her to die, deep in the Temple's labyrinth. Your father and all Clan Torsenn save you and your brothers, Dort sick with fever, and myself to attend him, died trying to rescue her. The men died in battle, the women and children of black spells and wastings. You and your brothers lived by the small sorcellments I commanded, which kept you hidden from the Dark Ones."

Sylwann was silent for several minutes. "You planned this for a very long time, didn't you?"

"Yes. I had to, lest Dort's terrible thirst for revenge destroy us all."

The girl thought about that. "Uncle Dort did not really battle Zaxa."

"He thinks he did, and that's what matters. He will see the truth of it in time, or I will tell him."

"It was you who fought Zaxa, or whatever that thing was."

"Yes, I fought that evil, though it had long since ceased to be Zaxa the Brilliant."

"You taught me that the Deep Knowledge couldn't be used to harm

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anyone. Yet you destroyed Zaxa with it." There was accusation in her amber eyes.

"I taught you," he said carefully, "that the Knowledge couldn't be used to small purpose, which is not the same thing, and that it is a mirror that reflects both ways. If you use it to hurt another, you will take some hurt yourself in return." He studied the holdfire box a moment, then sheathed his carving knife. "In any event, I but turned Zaxa's evil against him."

"Yet you were an instrument in that doing," she persisted, "and will be hurt because of that."

"Yes."

She sat a long time, staring out over the river. "It's hard being wise, isn't it? The choices are so unfair."

For answer he handed her the holdfire box. "Finished. It's yours, Sylwann. It always was. And your choice now."

She took it, not understanding. Then, searching her memory, she riddled it open. "Oh," she said softly. "Gods below."

A darkly handsome face was engraved on the coal chamber's fourth side, in detail so fine not even the hand of Illf Torsenn could have carved it. A living face that stared up in wide-eyed horror at Sylwann, that mouthed soundless pleas for mercy.

"Master Mage," Sylwann asked thoughtfully, "how long would a well-crafted holdfire box last, if it were kept filled with fresh coals?"

"That depends, 'Prentice," Illf said, emphasizing the title, "on how much hurt you are willing to bear."

They sat in considered silence as the beggars of Radimah-Duer oared the laret upriver toward the far High Lutterines.

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Levi Moran and his son Josh were trog miners on Centauri Primus, working a dream that had already cost them too much . . .

I Have Heard the Mermaids Singing

By Mary Caraker

JOSH MORAN GRIMACED as he tipped the hopper of loose rock onto the vibrating pan. "Shit!" He straightened his lanky, sixteen-year-old frame and stepped back from the clatter. It looked like an hour's work of sorting, at least, before he was through for the day.

He continued to mutter curses that he would never have dared use in his father's presence. A cloud of dust arose from the pan, and he moved back farther. Exploit labor, he though grimly. Slave labor. There ought to be a law, but who was there to care. Not when your boss was your old man, a rock-grubbing trog miner who didn't rate a sneeze in the estimations of anyone who mattered on Centauri Primus.

No, there would be no tea and cakes for either of them, not unless that load of dirty ore should miraculously show traces of tectite. Josh heaved a sigh, donned goggles and nose filter, and bent over the pan, searching for the telltale blue glow. He had barely started, when a piercing whistle penetrated the noise of the sorting shed.

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Josh switched off the vibrators and hurried outside the mine shaft. What could be the trouble now? He peered down the black hole and shouted, and the whistle issued forth again.

It was a "Get the hell down here" signal, and Josh didn't dare delay. He grabbed a helmet from the shaft shed, stepped on the platform, and lowered himself into the darkness.

His father was working a hundred yards down, well into a second parallel bore. A thin blue vein had looked promising at first, but it had soon petered out. Levi Moran, however, was pushing ahead with the drilling in the hope of striking one of the bubbles of pure tectite that such veins sometimes heralded.

A slim hope, Josh thought. They had followed so many false veins in the past five years that he expected nothing from this one. A final disappointment to mark the end of their fiasco of a lease.

Josh could see his father's light about fifty feet down the tunnel, where the thumps of the power sledge indicated that he was putting up new bracings. A pile of rocks blocked the passage between father and son.

Levi emerged from the hole as Josh approached. "Get this hauled away, will you?" he shouted. "I'm going to work late tonight, and there'll be a lot more."

Josh's heart sank. It looked like at least three loads, not to mention the sorting. He'd be at it until dark. "What about dinner, then?" he asked.

"Open a can. Christ, we got no time. . . ." Levi shook his head woodenly. "You know the score. It's our last chance."

Josh could judge Levi's desperation by the lowness of the new bore. His father was going to drill as far and as fast as he could, and he'd probably end up in a crawl hole.

"Don't stand there gawking; get to work!" Levi heaved another rock onto the pile. With his squat, muscular figure, dirt-encrusted under the single gleaming eye of his helmet, Josh had to admit that his father aptly fit the derisive "trog" label given to underground workers by the more fortunate citizens of Primus. Levi had been a trog all of his working life, first as a paid mine worker, and then, when he'd finally saved enough credits, as a wildcatter on two successive leaseholds.

After this one ran out, in weeks now, it would be back to the Company mines. The end of a long, hard-sweated dream that had cost him . . . too much, Josh thought. Calling to mind his mother, all the old bitterness

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welled up, and he resented his father more than ever.

Josh filled the ore car to overflowing, hauled it up, and emptied it into the sorting hopper. After the third trip, his body was a continuous dull ache, and he still had to work the pan.

Though Levi hadn't exactly *said* to finish all the sorting. The sun was low and turning orange, but Josh figured if he hurried, he could still make it to the Reikis' place before it was too dark to fly. He'd been thinking about it all day, and he'd be damned if he'd let Levi take that away, too.

Josh made one last trip down the shaft. "Dad, there's not even a packet left to fix for dinner," he lied. "O.K. if I take the sled to the Reikis'?"

Levi's mouth twisted into the expression of disgust that Josh knew too well. "Christ, what's wrong with you? Can't you plan ahead any better than that? You were just there the other day."

"Last week. And you saw what I got. For only five credits. . . ."

"Well, it was the last I had." Levi turned away from Josh, fiddling with the controls of his drill."Take 'em some of that last trace rock. Maybe they'll trade."

It would be begging for charity, but Josh didn't care. They only had to survive until they left the worthless mine, and then at least they'd be in a trog town with a regular paycheck coming in.

"Go on, then, if you have to," Levi growled. "I'll be up in a couple of hours." He snapped his visor shut, swung the drill to his shoulder, and stooped to enter the newly braced length of tunnel. In seconds, Josh heard the whine and felt the vibrations as the drill bit rock.

Dust drifted out, and a stream of rubble. Josh shuddered. God, if he ended up with that for a life. . . . But he'd get away somehow. His mother had, and no matter what everyone said about her, she'd only done what she had to.

ALOFT IN the airsled, Josh looked down at the mine site: bare, rocky earth disfigured with gouges and craters and heaps of rubble. Ramshackle sheds stood beside two boarded-up mines and the gaping black pit they were working now, and the house was a square block of uncompromising ugliness.

Michaela Moran had endured five years there, but when Levi broke his promise to her and used their scant profits to buy a second lease, she had made her escape. Josh had been so sure she would come back for him that

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he hadn't even cried. Years later, when she had been reported seen in the stews of Prime City, he had done so — a little — but he blamed his father more than he did her.

Promises. That's all Levi had ever given her. She had been lovely and slender and laughing once, before the meanness of the mine site had sucked away her joy. Josh had always wondered what had impelled her to marry a trog like Levi, who had nothing but his dream of tectite bubbles. He supposed that she must have believed in the dream once, too. Everyone did. Wealth or madness caught in blue fire, but no one ever considered the latter possibility. Michaela had pinned all her hopes on a life away from the mines, where there was grass and water and shining cities.

His mother had lived by the ocean when she was child. She had described it often to Josh. On a wall of the square house was a picture of mermaids sunning themselves on a rock, with the inscription, "I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each." Sometime in the year before she left, Michaela had penciled in, "But I do not think that they will sing to me."

Michaela had read the entire poem once with Josh. He hadn't understood most of it — only the hopeless misery in her voice. After she had run off with the trader, Levi had smashed the picture. It had been his one show of emotion. Josh had rehung it, scratched and without the glass, as a gesture of defiance, but Levi had not responded.

He had only worked the mine more obsessively than ever. He wasn't human, Josh thought. Anyone else would have abandoned the lease and gone to look for his wife. Anyone else would have seen that his son got sent to school. Levi thought that the schoolbooks Michaela had ordered were a good enough education, even without a teacher. He thought that Josh ought to be grateful for a roof over his head and the chance to break his back hauling rocks.

Anyway, it was all going to be over soon. Wherever Levi went to find work, it had to be better than the life they had now.

Josh headed the airsled toward the low mountain range where their nearest neighbors grubbed out a mining lease only slightly more profitable than Levi's. The Reikis, at least, received regular visits from a trader, and since Levi would no longer have one on his land, Josh had to bargain secondhand for supplies.

Elli Reiki was waiting when Josh stepped from the sled. A pert-faced

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redhead a year younger than he, she was united with him in common rebellion against their circumstances. She wore a faded jumpsuit, none too clean, but redeemed by the way her developing figure strained the seams.

"I saw you coming," Elli said, frowning. "But it's so late! You won't have any time here at all. Unless" — she brightened — "maybe you can stay the night."

Josh snorted. "You think Levi'd go for that?"

"No, I don't suppose so." She kicked at a clod of dirt. "Goddamn grownups, they're all the same." She showed Josh a bruise on her arm. "My old man did that, just because I spilled a bucket of water. Goddam well's gone dry, can you believe it? We got to haul it in now, all the way from the river."

"I wish I'd known — I could have brought some." Josh hefted his sack of ore. "I've got nothing but this to trade for grub. Think your dad'll take it?"

Elli shrugged. "I dunno. He's in a rotten mood. Besides the water, the new bore's been coming up a dud. And the latest trogs he hired are threatening to quit."

Matt Reiki continually had labor problems. "I wish I could work for him," Josh said. "At least I'd get paid something. It'd sure be better than the deal I got now."

"It's a bitch," Elli agreed. They approached the house, a stark, prefab like that of the Morans. Inside, Elli's mother grunted a greeting and went back to pouring coffee for the three men seated at the table. The remains of a meat stew simmered in a pot on the stove.

Josh set his sack down beside Matt Reiki. "Trace ore. You can have it all for some potatoes and a coupla packets of that." He pointed to the stew.

Matt opened the sack and examined one of the rocks. "What happened to the vein?"

Josh shrugged. "Ran out. But there" — he pointed to a smudge of blue. "That ought to be worth something."

"Hardly pay for the assaying," Matt said. "But what the hell, I'll take it. Can't let a neighbor starve. Rosie, see what you can spare for the Morans."

Elli's mother grumbled as she rummaged through a cupboard. One of the trogs regarded Josh slyly over the rim of his cup. "You Levi Moran's kid?"

Josh acknowledged that he was.

"Then you can tell him that I seen his old lady."

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Josh felt the blood drain from his face.

"Yeah, last time I was in Prime. Doin' all right, she is. Couldn't afford her myself, but —"

Josh leaped at the man, his fists flying. Elli screamed, and Matt pinioned Josh's arms before he could connect.

"Let me at him," Josh yelled as he struggled, but Matt held him securely and hustled him out of the house.

"Won't do no good to fight him," Matt said outside. "He's a mean one. Quittin' anyway, and good riddance."

Elli came to the door with a package. "Here's your stuff. I'll walk to the sled with you."

Josh refused to look at Elli as they started out. "Stupid trog, doesn't know anything," Elli said. "None of them do; the dust gets in their brains." She took his arm. "I'm sure gettin' out, somehow, before I end up like Mama, married to a goddamn mine."

"Me, too," Josh muttered. "If only we could get hold of some cash."

"I know where my dad keeps his," Elli said. "You could take the sled and fly us to Prime City. We could both get jobs there." Her fingers tightened. "I mean it, Josh. We could do it."

When he finally looked at her, Josh was convinced of her sincerity. Perhaps it was even possible, except.... "I don't know about the stealing," he objected.

"Hey, he deserves it!" She showed him her arm again. "We've got to make our own chances. For sure nobody else will."

They were at the airsled. "You'll think about it, won't you?" Elli pressed.

"I will," he promised. "I'll let you know soon."

She pulled his head down and pressed her lips against his. "You wouldn't be sorry," she whispered.

Josh was too overcome by surprise to respond. Elli backed hastily away, but as he climbed into the sled, she gave him a wink and a wave.

Josh flew home with his mind racing. To think of actually getting away from Levi! And Elli.... They had just been pals before, but now, if he had read her right.... He squirmed, feeling warm all over.

He certainly didn't owe any loyalty to Levi. If his father had only, just once, showed that he cared for anything but the mine.... But he wouldn't miss Josh; not anymore than he'd missed Michaela. He wouldn't even need him anymore, once he gave up the lease.

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There would be no problem, Josh thought, if only he had his own stake. He suspected that finding work, for a kid, wouldn't be as easy as Elli seemed to think. He didn't like the idea of living off Elli's stolen money, but if there were no other way. . . .

He overflew the site in the darkness and made a shaky flood-beam landing. Just his luck, Levi was coming from the mine shaft and saw it.

"What's the matter with you?" Levi yelled. "You trying to wreck the sled?" He caught up to Josh and continued to rail. "You know better than to come in after dark. Hangin' around with that Reiki girl. No sense, no sense at all!"

While Levi washed at the pump, Josh started preparations for dinner. He rinsed the potatoes and cut them up — no time to peel them. His father wanted his food on the table when he came in, and waiting for it wouldn't improve his temper.

Sure enough, he started in again. "And why'd you leave the sorting? Christ, you know that's part of your job. I got enough to do without takin' on your work, too."

Worthless rock, Josh thought. Why should they even bother looking through it? "Did you find anything?" he asked.

Levi sighed and sank into a chair. "I'm not givin' up. Not until they throw me off the land."

Josh stirred one of the packets into the boiling potatoes and set out plates. Napkins, too. God, he thought for the hundredth time, if Levi had to do the washing, he wouldn't be so fussy about the table. Who would care if they ate out of pots? It wasn't as if *she* were still there; and neither did it prove, as Levi seemed to think, that they could get along perfectly civilized without her.

His father wanted to make more work for him, that was all. Clean shirts for dinner! Josh found one that would pass inspection, and announced the meal.

"What's this, too much trouble to peel the spuds?" Levi pushed the offending item around on his plate.

"I . . . we were so late," Josh stuttered. He wished he dared say more. Well, it wouldn't be long. . . .

Levi finished the meal in silence. While Josh cleaned up, Levi looked through one of his old mining magazines. "Tectite prices ought to be higher than ever," he observed.

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"Won't do us any good," Josh said.

"It's not over yet."

You stubborn fool. Josh bit his lip to keep from blurting it aloud. *Isn't it enough that you ruined* her *life?* He considered disclosing what the trog at the Reikis' had said, but he couldn't bring himself to say it: Levi knew, he suspected. He must have his demons, even though he'd frozen out all normal feelings.

"Early day tomorrow," Levi said. "You'd better hit the sack, too."

There was nothing else to do. They used to get Prime City on the radio, but it hadn't been working for some time. Josh climbed to the loft where he had his bunk, and looked through some well-worn magazines of his own, but he couldn't find any stories that he hadn't read too many times. He heard his father turning over on the bed below, and wondered what was keeping him awake. Not a bad conscience, certainly. He hadn't one. He was always so right; so sure about everything.

He had apparently even thought himself sure about Michaela. Josh took out his mother's picture from its hiding place in the bottom magazine. He hadn't looked at it in a long time, and when he did, he was sorry. Did *she* ever think of him? He didn't suppose so. He blinked away an unwelcome moisture and hid the picture again quickly.

In the morning they were at the mine as soon as it was light. They descended with picks and two drills. "Here, you can start a new bore," Levi said. He indicated a spot at a cross angle from the tunnel he was cutting. "Mine doesn't look good, but I'll take it a little farther. Then we can both work on bracing this one."

Since the last time he'd ruined a drill head, Levi hadn't let Josh do any boring. He eyed him narrowly now. "Think you can handle it?"

"Sure." Josh hated working the drill, but what good would it do to tell Levi? Anyway, in the mine, one job was almost as bad as another.

Levi watched while Josh made his first cuts, then he disappeared into his own tunnel. Josh alternately drilled and pried with his pick, until he had a four-foot bore and a good-sized pile of rock. His arms ached badly, and he decided to load and sort what he had. If it showed nothing. . . . But no, Levi would only have him start drilling somewhere else.

Anyway, he'd have a chance to rest. He took his time up at the sorting shed, and when he finally filled the pan, he let it run for a good ten minutes before he looked.

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Under the light the blue gleam was unmistakable. There — and there again. Josh picked up a rock and examined it.

It was a tectite vein, no doubt about it. Not just a trace, either — the color ran deep.

Josh struggled with his first impulse, to run and tell Levi. He considered what it would mean. Levi would work the vein to its end, and if it was rich enough, he might even get enough credits from it to extend his lease. Another five years of grubbing, hoping for the ever-elusive bubble. The one that existed only in his mind.

On the other hand, if Josh kept the vein a secret, he could take out enough of it for a getaway stake for himself and Elli. It wouldn't be hard. Since he did the sorting, he could hide the tectite ore in one of the old sheds. Levi wouldn't be surprised when he told him that the new bore was a dud.

It would be a service to Levi, actually. The sooner he got rid of his crazy dreams, the better. He'd been content enough once as a paid trog, and he'd be so again.

Josh bent over the pan and picked out all of the tectite-bearing rocks. He dumped the others outside, but his cache he secreted as he had planned. His heart was beating wildly as he rode the platform back down into the mine, and he had trouble breathing. He had to be calm, he told himself; he couldn't let Levi get suspicious.

But Levi was still working in his own tunnel. When he came to check on Josh, he appeared to notice nothing unusual. Josh gave him the bad news about the first sorting, and he merely grunted. "Take it another couple of feet," he said. "Then we'll try somewhere else."

Josh filled half an oar car faster than he had thought possible. He peeked in at Levi and saw that he was still busy, then hurried up with his own load. He hid the blue-veined rocks again, but when he reentered the sorting shed, he stopped, frozen.

Levi stood by the pan, his fists clenched and his face an angry, mottled red. Cursing, he threw a handful of gravel across the room.

He knows, Josh thought.

But Levi, when he saw Josh, quickly controlled himself. "Nothing," he said, emptying the pan. "As usual." His face was once again an expressionless mask. "We might as well give up on both bores. Use the time that's left to sink a new shaft."

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Josh said nothing. Levi left, to scout around, he said, for a new location. As Josh watched him go, his trog body permanently stooped, he noticed for the first time that his father walked with the gait of an old man.

Levi would be gone some time, Josh knew — appraising every hill and crater. He could easily take out another load of rock. It would have to be the last, but now the vein was broadening, and he knew exactly where to drill.

He was doing the right thing, he reassured himself as he worked. The veins always looked good like this before they gave out. This time there would be no false hopes.

Josh covered his last cuts with a load of rubble, just in case Levi came snooping. When he finished the sorting, he had a full sack of tecitite ore, and Levi was still gone.

He would go to the house, Josh decided, and see if he could get the shortwave to working long enough to call Elli. She would have to be ready the next time he went for groceries.

The house door was ajar. Funny, Josh thought, he had been the last to leave, and he didn't remember. . . . Anyway, it was lucky he'd found it. If the house was full of bugs, Levi would be at him again.

He entered quietly, sensing something strange inside, too. An odd sound, like a moan, came from the loft.

Josh stepped back, out of sight, but he could see his bed and his father's figure huddled on it. Levi held Michaela's picture in his hands, and his shoulders heaved with strangled sobs.

Josh left the house silently, his only thought to get away without his father seeing him. As he walked back to the mine, the world of all his preconceived ideas seemed to be shifting under him.

JOSH SHOVELED frantically at the pile of rubble. He had to get back to the vein and follow it; he owed Levi at least that much. Everything had changed now, and yet — it was still the same. Maybe Levi *did* have feelings — at least toward Michaela — but as far as Josh was concerned, the son would remain a slave as long as the father pursued his tectite obsession.

There — a last shovelful, and the cut was exposed. Josh began to drill. He had turned it over and over in his mind, and finally decided to see for himself how far the vein went. If it gave out as he expected, he would

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follow his original plan. But if there *was* a bubble . . . his father deserved that chance.

Shards of rock flew as Josh swung his pick. He had only half a day to work, and couldn't be bothered with shoring. Levi would be gone until dark — he'd taken the airsled to Prime City to get blasting powder and rent a laser drill. "No time anymore to fool around," he'd said.

Josh's time sped quickly, too. Drilling and digging and hauling, his arms were numb and his back a torture. The vein already continued much farther into the strata of rock than he had ever thought likely, and it showed no sign of running out.

The drill blunted, and Josh almost lost his balance. He moved his light to peer at a dark patch on the rock face, and as he saw it more clearly, he gasped.

The bubble extruded smoothly from the surrounding rock, like an enormous drop of solidified liquid. Unalloyed tectite, glowing faintly, its interior pulsing with mysterious power.

Josh breathed a long, low whistle, as he stared.

The stuff of dreams. Worlds turned within its depths; starships streaked across vast caverns of space; fires of industry roared.

It held the spark of all life; the past and the future. Josh's future, and Levi's. The mermaids, certainly, and all of their songs.

Josh continued to stare, transfixed. Images flickered in the blue glow, but were too quickly gone. His first home . . . his school . . . Michaela. Fascinated, he crept closer, until the bubble seemed to become an extension of himself. Then it *was* himself, his very thoughts pulled from him and imprisoned within it.

He couldn't break free. Too late, he remembered the warnings about pure tectite. *If you look into it, you are lost.* It could trap your mind and suck it away.

He was powerless as time stopped. Minutes, hours — he didn't know. He existed in a void, until dimly he heard shouts and felt himself grabbed from behind. "No! No!" he screamed as he was forced away, his head exploding.

He felt more than saw the blinding flash, and then there was only darkness. He came back to consciousness to find his father bending over him.

"Do you know me? Do you remember?" Levi's face, under the light, was a mask that had crumpled.

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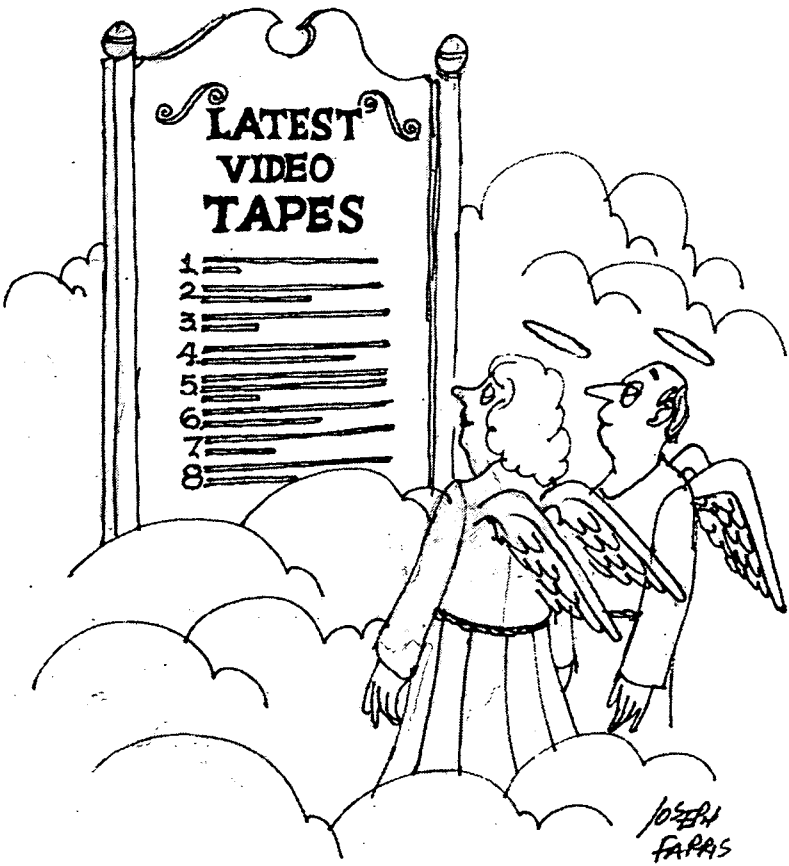
"Of course I do." Josh was weak with relief at being free, but as Levi helped him to his feet, he had an awful certainty of what he would find in the tunnel. He looked around, and it was true. The wall that had held the tectite bubble was a scarred ruin. A hole gaped, and bits of blue glittered in the rubble beside Levi's laser drill.

"You've destroyed a fortune," Josh whispered.

"Yes." Levi's hand closed on Josh's shoulder, and Josh did not move. Nothing more was said, but there was no need. Josh covered his father's hand with his own.



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This welcome new story from long-time contibutor Kit Reed is about Jenny Masterson, who comes through major surgery only to face an unexpected and strange new problem.

A Double

By Kit Reed

JENNY WOKE TO discover with delight that she was still alive. Whatever discomfort she felt was nothing compared to the anxiety with which she had rolled in to surgery; later on she might complain about the dreary sensation in her midsection that she could not quite locate or identify as pain, or the place on her hand where the IV had slipped its vein and was making a sausage of her wrist, but now—! Listen, she was still here, and if after what she 'd been through it seemed hard to breathe, well, what could you expect? Locating the plastic button clipped to her pillow, she rang for the nurse to let everybody know that she was back on earth. She heard rubber-soled shoes squelching down the polished corridor, the nurse approaching. In seconds the weight on her chest lifted; the huge amorphous shadow that had been swelling over her receded and her side of the room was filled with light.

Hey, wait a minute.

But Tim was at her side, along with their children, loving hands reach-

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ing for her but afraid to touch; one of the kids thrust flowers at her, another, a hastily lettered card and Tim put his big, square hand behind her head gently and slipped a string of polished amber around her neck, his present to her for staying around.

"Congratulations, babe."

"I guess I made it, huh."

Love glazed his eyes with tears. "You bet you did."

"And I don't feel too bad."

He said, gently, "They told me you would be out cold until morning, but I hung around, in case."

"I guess I wanted to get back to you."

Why did she think there was also something huge hanging over her, that she had been trying hard to shake? With Tim here and the lights on, she couldn't be sure. Pragmatic Jenny put it down to fear. Who isn't afraid of dying under the knife every time?

"The nurses think you're phenomenal. When they got here you were already sitting up."

"I want to get well so I can get out of here."

"They say they never saw anybody snap back so fast."

"Oh, wow," said Jenny, who was a lap swimmer. "It must have been those five miles a week."

"It's because you're special," Tim said.

I made it, Jenny thought. *Maybe I am.*

"Mom, I made you some cookies."

"You're wonderful."

In the warmth of their affection, she began to drowse.

In ordinary circumstances, she would have slept, but she was afraid to let go. Something had snagged in her consciousness like a fish-hook, a nagging discomfort that would not let her slip into sleep. Her husband adored her; her children surrounded her, she was alive, but wait. When she could afford to roll over, which she managed with a careful whipping around of catheter and IV coils, she saw what had troubled her from the moment she woke up: the white hospital curtain around her bed. Struggling against the undertow of anaesthesia, she pulled at Tim's arm.

"Babe, what's the matter?"

"I don't know, it's just." She was surprised by how strong her voice was, after everything. "It's that damn curtain."

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Tim shrugged. "You know, privacy."

"Privacy! I asked for a single room."

"They got hung up in Admitting. Overbooked. They put you into a double," Tim said.

"A double. But I asked for a single."

"Well things are tight."

"I never asked for a double." She didn't want to know who the roommate was — at least, not yet. As long as they didn't speak, she could pretend to be alone in here.

"It's all they had."

"Oh shit."

And from behind the curtain she heard or imagined she heard a moan and saw or thought she saw the coarse white cotton stuff of the curtain billow as if swelled by the windpower of an enormous sigh.

"A roommate isn't so bad," he said. "At least you'll have company."

She rolled her head from side to side — hey, pain! "Company!"

"They say it's a good idea. Take your mind off things."

"Oh, thanks."

"Besides," Tim said helpfully, "if you get in trouble, you'll have somebody to call for help."

"I'm not going to get in trouble."

"Of course you're not," Tim said. "Look, the nurse is coming with your shot."

She would never know how long he and the children stayed after she slipped beneath the surface of consciousness, into sodden, intermittantly troubled sleep. Nor could she be certain whether she was awake and actually heard deep sobbing or whether she only dreamed that in the darkness somebody was weeping incessantly. If somebody was sniffling with pain or weakness or both, she couldn't even be certain whether it was she, Jenny Masterton, who rolled and moaned in the miasma of three o'clock in the morning, or whether the sounds came from someone else.

Then it was morning and even with the white curtain still in place, sunlight filled the room. Her breakfast came and with it the morning paper, folded so that the story of her promotion — with picture — was on top. She said to the nurse who checked her vitals, "Boy, I bet I don't look much like that picture."

"It won't take much to fix you up," the nurse said. "When I come back

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we'll brush your beautiful hair and put on that good-looking robe."

"That's great. I hate hospital gowns."

"My pleasure. We don't get too many vice presidents."

As the nurse departed Jenny heard sniffling; it was persistent, like a visitor waiting to be recognized.

Yes, there was another patient in the room. Maybe she could pretend she didn't know. If she didn't speak, maybe she wouldn't be spoken to; it was her own way of protecting her privacy. In her weakened condition, and in the absence of a single room, it was the only thing she could do.

The sniffling might have gotten on her nerves if she hadn't been distracted by the phone — friends, family, people from the company, even the chairman of the board, who hated to bother her but couldn't finish the annual report without a quotation from Jenny Masterton.

After the nurse had helped her wash and put on the green robe and the diamond studs, Jenny looked at her own tough face in the mirror and said, "If I walk, I can take my own shower tomorrow, right? And wash my hair?"

The nurse said, "Catheter out. Maybe get rid of IV. All kinds of good things, but with surgery like yours — it's too soon."

Riding high on the fact that she had emerged from the jaws of death to comb her hair and put on makeup, Jenny said, "I swim five miles a week. I can definitely make it as far as the corridor." And so she did; the nurses said it was amazing. Her stitches held; her insides did not fall out; she had to hang on to the rolling IV pole to steady herself but here was Jenny Masterton after major surgery, back on two feet and more: a newly minted executive.

Back in bed, she could not ignore the rising cascade of sniffles coming from the other side of the curtain — the little moans, which finally coagulated into speech. "Some people get baths and everything because they're so special. Well, I'm not special, I'm not a vice president, I'm not anything, I'm just a poor lady stuck here in bed without having anything for breakfast and without even a washcloth to clean my poor face."

Jenny's groan was in part for her lost privacy. "Oh dear."

"I rang and rang."

"I'm sorry," Jenny said.

"And I've been waiting for the bedpan for hours. But they don't care about me."

"Of course they do."

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"They don't care and you don't care, you're a vice president."

"I really am sorry."

"And everybody loves you."

Embarrassed by her own blessings, Jenny said, "Shh. Don't cry. It's going to be O.K." After a momentary silence in which she considered the implications, Jenny rang the nurses' bell.

"Yes, Mrs. Masterton."

"Thanks for coming so quickly. It's about my roommate."

The nurse's face darkened. Her voice dropped. "Oh, that one."

"She seems not to have gotten her breakfast."

From behind the curtain came a whisper. "And the bath."

"And the bath," Jenny said.

The nurse was shaking her head. "Of course," she said. "We'll be right with you, Mrs. McGillie." Then she leaned closer. "A difficult patient," she whispered, with a significant look.

Jenny nodded. "What do you suppose are my chances of getting moved into a single?"

The nurse said, "I'll check at the desk."

As the nurse cleared the room the roommate said, "I knew you didn't like me."

"That isn't it," Jenny said. "I just. . . . Oh, don't feel hurt."

"Nobody likes me."

"Of course they do. I do. I'm just trying to get well here."

There was a sob. "I'm never going to get well."

"Of course you are," Jenny said but then covered her mouth with her hand. Oh dear. What if this person was terminal? She said, as warmly as she could manage, "We all want you to get well."

"You all don't care if I die."

There was something unlikeable in the voice, Jenny realized, and remembered an old psychological term: *the human swamp.* In spite of her revulsion she said, comforting, "Come on, you have friends here. Oh listen, if I get a single room I'll come back and visit. I will."

"You don't have to lie about it," the roommate said.

But the nurse had come back into the room. She was shaking her head. "I wish I could do something for you, but. . . ."

Jenny shrugged. "Then I guess I'd better get better so I can get out."

The nurse said brightly, "At the rate you're going, you will."

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So it came as a surprise to Jenny to wake from a long drowse feeling the way she had when she first come out of surgery — as if that great grey cloud she could not identify had receded only seconds before. She was having a hard time breathing and this left her feeling forlorn and distinctly seedy, when she'd wanted her head to be clear for afternoon visiting hours. Shadows were clumping at the periphery of her vision, and when she tried to raise herself to her elbows she could not. She didn't even feel like turning her head to look at the cards on the flowers, which must have been delivered while she slept.

"You've had a little setback," her doctor said on his afternoon visit, and he wrote a new prescription and left.

The staff doctor came in to look at Mrs. McGillie's foot. All that mizzling, and she was in here because she'd had a *toe* removed?

The staff doctor was saying, "I'll order extra meals and make certain to check at least once every two hours until you're up and around. You don't want to lose any more toes."

Fogged in by drugs, Jenny, who was doing her best to forget she'd been cut open thought: *a toe! Where does she get off?*

"I just can't take any more," Mrs. McGillie sobbed, on the far side of the curtain. "The woe!"

"Maybe you should pull yourself together," Jenny said, or thought she said. She slept again. When she woke it was getting dark in the room.

"You missed all your nice visitors," her unseen roommate said. "They left flowers. Plus your mother sent flowers, and so did the gang from work. I never get flowers, and Delmore, all Delmore sent was this sick little violet, and he never comes. Nobody ever comes to see me, but you.... You have so many friends that they're all going to come back and see you at five o'clock." She was sniffling again. "Nobody likes me. Nobody cares."

"Didn't you get your bath?"

"Yes I got my bath, and I got my lunch too — and your lunch, since you were sleeping and didn't need it, and the cookies your secretary brought? Secretary!" she finished with a snort.

"I'm sorry," Jenny said automatically.

"But that doesn't mean anybody likes me," the roommate said tearfully. "Nobody likes me, nobody cares, not even you."

"I like you," Jenny lied. "I like you fine."

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"Oh sure," Mrs. McGillie said through bitter tears. "I heard you asking to be moved."

"It isn't you," Jenny said desperately, "It's just. . . ." How could she tell this lady; how could Jenny Masterton, who was loved and needed and by this time surrounded by floral tributes in gaudy baskets with bright bows; how could she tell this dreary, lonely fellow-patient that she just wanted to be alone? "Cheer up, it looks like we're going to be together for a while."

Jenny wished the woman would stop sniffling. She was feeling somewhat weepy herself.

"You'll feel better once you've had supper," Tim said, but he seemed upset because she was depressed. He moved to the cloth barrier that protected her from the roommate. "Maybe we should pull back this curtain to let in more light."

"Oh no!"

Something about her expression made him peer around the curtain to steal a glance at the roommate. His voice dropped. "I see your point."

Reaching for his hand, Jenny tried to begin. "Oh, Tim."

But he shushed her with a spoonful of soup. "Here, let me get some food into you. You'll feel better after you eat."

He turned out to be right. By the time Victor, the company vice president, arrived for their early evening conference, Jenny was out of bed and sitting in her chair.

She was surprised by how guilty this made her feel, conferring with Victor while her wretched roommate spent the evening the way she spent all her time, alone. Still it was not her fault that she and her boss jabbered like old friends or that as he left the kids called up to wish her goodnight or that she spent the grey interlude after visiting hours are over but before it's time to sleep listening to Mrs. McGillie on the phone. She was talking to the recalcitrant Delmore, who was definitely not coming to see her tonight even though it had been weeks and who apparently told her he didn't care that nobody cared. Listening to the — what, *impoverished* quality of their conversation, Jenny was just as glad not to know for certain whether the unloving Delmore was Mrs. McGillie's husband or son or what.

The wheezing from behind the curtain devolved into self-pitying sobs that frightened Jenny for reasons she could not identify.

In a desperate drive for independence, or was it instinct for escape, she

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conned the night nurse into taking her for a final totter down the corridor, and as a result convinced her that she could do without the catheter because she, Jenny, was quite strong enough to make it to the tiny bathroom in the room if she got caught short in the night. For whatever reasons she thought: *make it easier to escape,* and because the implications were so preposterous, put them down to overmedication and immediately corrected it to: *get out in case of fire.*

She had thought she could make it through to morning without having to get up but near dawn she knew she was going to have to try to get to the bathroom, which she did. When she came out she realized with a shock that she was not as steady as she thought. She stood swaying with one hand on the IV pole, unconsciously reaching for the foot of the other bed in the room for support.

Thus Jenny Masterton caught her first look at the roommate whose miseries had suffused the double room, clouding her mind and slowing her recovery. The worst part — she could not have said definitely that this was in fact a person in the other bed — at first.

What she saw first was an enormous mound of bedclothes, outsized and evilly proportioned, a threatening shape. As she focused she understood that the bedcovers barely covered a flowing, billowing mass of flesh and fabric that filled the bed. Everything about this mass was so flat and white that it was hard to tell which was covers and which was flesh. She thought it was lying on its back but the body was so shapeless that it was hard to know.

The only immediately indentifiable item was the massive bandage on one protruding foot. *But for the grace of God* — the huge body reproached her. But within seconds, a surer, tougher part of her self said, *Listen, nobody has to be that fat. Nobody.*

A wind rushed through her head: *Don't be so sure.*

She wanted to push the IV pole past and make her escape to the other side of the curtain before she had to see any more but an odd, uncomfortable feeling slowed her reflexes and she found herself transfixed. Forced to look again, she saw to her horror that everything in the bed looked like everything else on the bed except for a dark furze of hair at the top and just beneath it — just beneath it, Mrs. McGillie's scrunched up face. Embedded in the flesh, she saw two eyes, one shut and one. . . .

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Sparkling like a malevolent black bead, a single eye balefully regarded her.

Under the circumstances, it seemed better not to speak.

Feeling like an escaping criminal, Jenny fled to the safety of her own bed behind the white muslin curtain.

The dark cloud descended. *You think you're so special. Well, I'm special too.* The words! Were they imagined, or only spoken?

"I thought you were supposed to feel better on the second day," she told her doctor when he finally turned up.

"Not necessarily."

"Listen," she said, out of a deep uneasiness. "There's something the matter."

"Par for the course," he said breezily, gently removing her fingers from his wrists and patting her hand to keep it down.

"No, that isn't it, I. . . ."

"You've been through a lot," he said in a there-there tone, and would not listen to her attempts to explain herself. He pushed her back onto the pillows with gentle but inexorable hands. "Give yourself a break and get some rest."

"There's trouble," she said helplessly.

"I'll order you some Valium. Five milligrams."

"Not that kind of trouble." How could she explain her sense of imminent danger? She dropped her voice. "Trouble in the room."

The doctor said, "Maybe I'd better make that ten."

From the other side of the curtain, she heard Mrs. McGillie's doctor telling her that it wouldn't be long before she was up and around.

Up and around, Jenny thought angrily, and did not know why this alarmed her. *It's only a toe.*

Vincent came again, with an enormous box of Godiva chocolates and a card signed by every member of the company; Tim brought a beautiful pair of emerald studs for her ears and the kids came with more drawings and a cassette of themselves staging a get-well musical.

Did she hear or only imagine she heard the voice from behind the curtain saying, "You have everything, don't you?"

Jenny was so warmed by their visit that she found herself rattling the curtain in mid-afternoon and saying, solicitously, "How are you feeling?"

The gust of hostility that stirred the curtain surprised her. "Fat lot

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you care. All you want is to get away from me."

"That's not true, it's. . . ." It was. "I just wasn't expecting a roommate."

"Expecting your own way, weren't you?" The voice was stronger now, and spiteful. "Well not all of us get our own way just because we want it."

The rest stood in the air between them: *I want what you have*, palpable even though unspoken.

"I know."

"Not all of us are special."

She was so embarrassed by the truth of this that Jenny's voice broke. "I'm sorry." Was it her fault she was Jenny, who had worked all her life for what she had, and not somebody *less*? What did the woman want from her? "Look, I've got too many flowers. I'll get the nurse to put some of them on your table."

"Just you forget it," Mrs. McGillie said in a cold voice. "Don't do me any favors."

Thus the late afternoon: silence up through dinner.

After the last evening visitor left, before the nurse came with the doctor's ration of Valium topped off by sleeping pills, Jenny drifted into sleep in the fuzzy brown light of early night or late evening. When she woke, something had changed — the light in the room, the way the curtain fell between the two beds, the way the various small objects sat on her bedside table.

I want what you have.

In a series of shock cuts Jenny focused on the table: long shot, close one, closer. What was the matter? It was the candy box, the five pound box of Godiva chocolates. It was in exactly the same place, but the gold elastic had been misarranged. With an effort, Jenny reached out and touched it with her little finger; the light tap almost pushed it off the table. It was. Wait, how could it be empty when the roommate claimed she couldn't walk?

I want. . . .

Alarmed, she touched her ears. The emerald studs were gone.

The night nurse was distressed to find Jenny lying back with her eyes closed and her face wet with tears of weakness that just would not stop seeping. "Here here, what's this? We can't have crying, not at this stage."

Jenny whispered, "I'm sorry. I just. I can't. I have to." Finally she managed enough breath to finish it. "You've got to get me out of this room."

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"You really are upset! There's nothing I can do tonight, but you go ahead and take this, it'll help you sleep. I promise, I'll talk to my supervisor and see if we can't set up something for you first thing in the morning."

From behind the curtain Mrs. McGillie spoke. "I knew you didn't like me."

Agonized by the promptings of good manners, Jenny was not feeling strong enough to refute her.

Even though it was after eleven she managed to get her doctor to return the call she made to his service; a born executive, she knew how to get such responses.

"I'm going to make a call to the nurses' station as soon as I get off the phone," he said soothingly, as if to a small child, because medication had fogged her brain and left her tongue furry.

"Please," she managed. "Tonight. I have to get out of here tonight."

"Shh. Shh," he said in that infuriating there-there tone. "Nurse will be in in just a couple of minutes with your injection."

"Injection!" But he was gone. Desperate, Jenny struggled to a sitting position and managed to turn her body so that her feet dangled a few inches above the floor, ready to slide into her slippers. She'd spend the night in the solarium if she had to, anything to get out of here.

"Here, what's this?" the nurse said. "Just when the doctor has ordered you some Demerol to top off your medications. Here, let's get those feet back up on the bed. I'm going to need to roll you over."

Too weak to resist the nurse's hands or the delicious feeling that spread almost from the first prick of the needle, Jenny found herself back under the covers, gently arranged on her back with a thermometer in her mouth and her arms folded lightly and sheet and cotton blanket tucked tightly, not so much covering as restraining her failing body.

"Oh please," she said, but her voice was so faint that the nurse didn't even hear her.

"Hah!" From the other side of the curtain, the roommate's voice exploded in a fierce sound of satisfaction.

Jenny said, into the darkness, "I never asked for a double."

"Well, you have one," the roommate said.

Thus Jenny, executive vice president, beloved wife and cherished mother of three, Jenny with her pretty hair and her nice robe surrounded

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by flowers and, as it turned out in spite of her best efforts, up to and including the five miles she swam every week — Jenny Masterton, reduced to the essentials and essentially helpless. "Oh," she whispered, just as the drugs swept her into rapturous unconsciousness. "Oh please," she sighed, and gave herself up to it.

As darkness descended she was dimly aware of the curtain separating the beds billowing before a prodigious, satisfied sigh.

Therefore she was not surprised to wake into the fierce dawn to find the thundercloud — the gigantic, amorphous form of her roommate — hovering over her in what seemed to be a feat of levitation, Mrs. McGillie ballooning until she filled the horizon, bearing down on Jenny with her eyes aflame and her jaws glaring: *You have everything you want, while I. . . .*

"I want it."

And in her last living moments before the great, soft body bore down and overwhelmed her, Jenny could not have said whether the monstrous female shape was going to devour or assume or simply smother her; all she thought was, *I never wanted a double*

and she heard the rest:

Well you have one.

Then her monstrous nemesis growled, or rumbled in a voice like low thunder: "I want what you have, and now it's mine."

(from page 40)

rian figure; I had no notion of how and where the magical and real worlds met; and, above all, I couldn't even venture a guess as to why anybody did anything they ended up doing, and therefore couldn't even tell if I was supposed to be pleased or horrified at how things turned out. All in all, one of the most disappointing books I've ever read.

But in a way, such a review is hardly fair. I was disappointed precisely because the book began so well, and because I have received so much joy from other books by Wolfe. His genius is undoubted, and so I am left to speculate that brighter or more careful readers than I might well find this book eminently satisfying. For me, though, it remains a kind of platonic ideal of a book: a thing of beauty that is nevertheless utterly beyond my comprehension.

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Vance Aandahl's covering letter described this story as "a near-future gridiron cyberpunk love story with undercurrents of mysticism," and we don't think we can do any better than that.

Scoring

By Vance Aandahl

THE OTHER KIDS had long since piled off the bus by the time Danny finally found his cloak stuffed under the backseat. Pulling the garment over his shoulders, he hurried up the aisle and down the steps.

It was getting dark out. Danny saw the other kids moving in a herd away from the buses across the parking lot toward the stadium gates.

Wait! he thought. Wait for me!

He took off running. But before he could catch up, a figure stepped out from behind a parked pickup truck and blocked his way.

She didn't say a word — just stood there looking at him. Looking at him with silver eyes. Store-bought silver eyes with little round windows instead of pupils. What else? A cascade of shimmery platinum hair. Smooth neosynth skin. Sensuous realmeat lips.

Mother of Buddha, thought Danny. I've never seen anyone with so many implants.

She lifted one eyebrow and let her mouth soften into a sexy pout.

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Danny's heart danced in his chest. She came toward him and stood only a couple of feet away. She was wearing a clingy solar sweater with the initials HH luxxed on the front.

Why doesn't she say something? What's a girl from Harrison Heights doing over here anyway? Why isn't she on the other side of the stadium where she belongs?

The windows in her silver eyes closed and opened, closed and opened, dilating according to their own built-in rhythm. Each time they opened, Danny thought he saw something inside, but he didn't know what it was. A sick thrill ran through his intestines, and his heart pounded even faster.

"You're kinda cute for a farm boy," she said at last. "Maybe I'll see you after the game."

"Wh . . . what?" he stammered. "Who are you? What's your name?"

"It doesn't matter." Her voice sank into a voluptuous whisper. "There's only one thing that matters."

She smiled in a way that made his knees dissolve. Then she turned and walked with just the hint of a wiggle around the pickup into the darkness.

Dazed, Danny shuffled across the parking lot and through the gates into the stadium. Night was coming, and the air had grown colder. He gathered his wool cloak tightly around him and trudged up the steps to the top row. He sat on a bench by himself. The benches down near the field were packed, but there were only a few other kids this high in the stands.

He wanted to be alone. He didn't care about the game anymore. So what if it was the district playoffs. All he could think about were those silver eyes. And that smile. He buried his face in his hands. His whole body was shivering with excitement.

A burst of noise erupted from the stands on the other side of the field. He saw a rippling sea of silver and platinum. The Harrison Heights fans were on their feet, waving screechers back and forth and blasting hammerhorns at full volume as their team came running onto the field. The Scalpels were wearing uniforms of laminated ceramic armor. They looked enormous. When they spread out and started doing pushups in unison, their fans cheered even louder. Danny cringed and covered his ears.

What a racket — how can they stand it? And what about *her*! Is she over there with the rest of them?

His own team ran onto the field. The Naturals wore thin cotton uni-

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forms with cowhide pads. They looked puny compared to the Scalpels.

Danny heard a new sound rising up around him, a deep and resonant sound, an organic sound, softer and wiser than the Harrison Heights din:

"Ommm . . . Ommm . . . Ommm. . . ."

Joyously, he joined the chant. Energy came into him from the stars and the moon and the earth, and from the sheep who had grown the wool for his cloak, and from the mother who had spun the wool and woven it into a garment of love to keep him warm. Chanting the first mantra was wonderful. It always heightened Danny's perception of the One Oneness.

No longer did he want to be alone. He got up and walked down the steps to the crowded lower rows. Leroy and Mel Lewis were sitting next to the aisle. He knew them fairly well from being in the same work-study group during the sugar beet harvest.

"Hey, Leroy — got room for one more?"

"Look," said Leroy, tugging at the sleeve of Mel's tunic. "It's Danny."

"Danny!" cried Mel. He reached across his brother to clasp Danny's hand, then slid over to make room on the bench. As Danny sat down between the brothers, he saw two girls whose names he didn't know sitting next to Mel. They wore long robes of drab gray haircloth. Their heads were bowed. They held their hands together and recited the prayer for athletic success under their breath.

Down on the field, the captains of the two teams had met at the fifty yard line for the coin flip. The Scalpel captain loomed over the Natural captain, but the Naturals won the toss and elected to receive.

Danny turned to Leroy. "I still can't believe we're playing a cyschool," he said. "Do you think we'll win?"

Leroy uttered a soft bark of astonishment. Danny turned to Mel. Mel laughed stoically and said, "Just because we beat the other farmschools doesn't mean we have a chance against Harrison. They're too quick and too strong."

"But the rules —"

"The rules prevent them from using their defense implants, but what can the rules do about their enhanced bones and muscles and hyped reflexes? I'm afraid we're in for a long night, Danny. The most our guys can hope for is to keep the score reasonably close."

Mel talks like he knows everything, thought Danny. But if he doesn't pull up his grades, he'll get —

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An explosion of crowd noise blew Danny's thoughts away. The game was starting! He leaped to his feet in time to see the Scalpel kicker boot the ball clear out of the end zone. It didn't look like there'd be many chances tonight for the Naturals to run back kickoffs.

The Naturals broke from their huddle and lined up in a triple wing. As the Natural shamanback sang out the count, the Scalpel cruisers kept shifting around and jumping back and forth, threatening to stunt their way across the line and crush that scrawny little all-organic farm boy on the very first play of the game.

What happened was even worse than Danny feared. The snap was too strong. The poor shamanback just stood there with his head tipped back, watching the ball arc over him. Two of the Scalpel cruisers knocked him flat charging after it. They pounced on it simultaneously in the end zone for a touchdown.

A demonic howl of bloodlust rose from the stands across the way. Mother of Buddha, thought Danny. Down on the field, the shamanback peeled himself off the turf and staggered to his feet while the Harrison Heights players amused themselves by taunting the Naturals. The Naturals hung their heads in shame. On the sidelines, their coach sank to his knees and lifted his arms in despair.

There was to be no mercy. Danny watched in silence as the game wore on and the score mounted. Finally, with only a few seconds left in the fourth quarter, the Scalpel slashback ran through the Natural tertiary for one more touchdown, and the margin of defeat widened to three digits on the scoreboard:

HARRISON HEIGHTS	105
FARMSCHOOL	0

The two girls next to Mel were rubbing their eyes, trying not to cry. Mel stared blankly at the field. Leroy sat hunched over with his face in his hands, his head bowed at an angle that made Danny think of the big wooden chopping block in the packing shed back on the farm. The night air had acquired a sharp bite. Danny shivered and pulled his cloak tightly around his shoulders.

After the kickoff, the Natural offense took the field for the last time. They had the ball on their own twenty with time left for one play. They

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gathered together in a close huddle, arms wrapped around each other's shoulders.

The fans in the Harrison Heights stands grew quiet. Maybe they're hoarse from screaming so much, thought Danny.

But that wasn't it. Something strange was happening. On the field a warm light emanated from the Natural huddle. It glowed like an aura or a halo.

Danny felt a magical energy entering his body. It came tingling down into his scalp from the far and lonely stars. It came breathing its way into the pores of his skin from the still and holy air. It came rising up through the soles of his feet from the Earth herself, the One Mother, beloved goddess procreator of them all.

With an exultant shout, the players broke from the huddle and ran to the line. Their faces shone with ecstacy.

And then Danny knew. The Naturals were going to score.

The Scalpels knew it. Inside the laminated ceramic armor of their uniforms, they cowered and grew small.

The crowd knew it. A happy murmur rippled through Danny's side of the stands.

The mandala hiked the ball, the shamanback seized it, and with one voice the farmschool fans filled the stadium with the sound of One Word:

"OMMMMMMM. . . ."

Whirling mystically, the shamanback spun three times and pitched the ball to the deep fisher. The deep fisher cocked the ball behind his ear and backed up to throw a long pass. Half a dozen Scalpel defenders converged on him. At the last moment, he tucked in the ball, slipped by the first wave of Scalpels, and ran straight up the field. He ran close to the ground with a fluid stride. Somehow his blockers managed to clear the way, knocking would-be Scalpel tacklers to the ground. Desperate fingers clawed at the deep fisher's jersey, but he ran past them, ran like the wind, ran the whole eighty yards and scored just as time ran out. It was a miracle.

Danny and his friends were jumping up and down and hugging each other. Down on the field, the Naturals swarmed around the deep fisher in a wild celebration. A few of the Scalpels strolled over and shook hands, just to show they were good sports. Finally the two teams left the field, walking off in opposite directions toward their respective locker rooms.

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Harrison Heights had won the game 105 to 6, and would move on to the district finals. For Farmschool #43 the football season was over. But that didn't matter. Only one thing mattered. They had scored.

Shouting hallelujahs and hosannas, Danny and the others danced out of the stadium gates into the parking lot. The girls sang hymns of rejoicing and tossed handfuls of wheat and corn in the air. The boys pounded on drums of sacred pine and piped on cattail flutes. Merry laughter bubbled through the crowd. Everyone was talking excitedly about the deep fisher's run. With one hand, Danny held together the fleecy front of his cloak. With the other he reached out to touch his friends, patting them on the back and clasping hands. Pushed this way and that by the triumphant throng, he felt happy.

Then he saw her.

She was standing directly in his way, waiting for him. A gust of wind lifted her hair in a swirl of iridescent platinum filaments. She fixed her eyes on his. Stunned, he gazed back.

"You're looking at me," she said, her voice low and seductive.

"What?" He tried to swallow, but his throat was too dry.

"I know what you want." She smiled wickedly. "It's what I want, too."

"But . . . but. . . ." His heart kicked frantically, trapped inside his rib cage like a horse in a burning stable.

"Come with me." She reached out and stroked him under the chin. Her fingertips felt unnaturally smooth and cold. Synthetic. Deadly.

He looked around for help, but his friends had left him behind. They were all at the far end of the parking lot now, gathered in a herd around the buses. Even if he shouted, they wouldn't come back. Why should they? They were happy together and had forgotten him entirely.

Danny tried to speak but couldn't. His mouth hung slack. He stared into her silver eyes. Store-bought silver eyes. Silver eyes with little round windows that closed and opened at precise intervals, over and over and over again, endlessly, hypnotically. They held him mesmerized, and he knew he was too weak to flee or resist.

"We're getting together, sweetmeat. You and me. Right now." Her voice was a hot whisper that burned against his cheek. "And I can guarantee it's going to be mega for *both* of us."

"I'll never see the farm again . . . will I?"

Her smile widened, and for the first time he saw her kissing implants.

The girl with the silver eyes was going to score. And Danny knew it.

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Ronald Anthony Cross, "Every Trembling Blossom, Every Singing Bird" (March 1990), offers a new story about the disturbing events occurring at the world famous Fun Club.

Down the Hatch

By Ronald Anthony Cross

I CAN'T TELL YOU why I spent so much time in the great preserve in central Africa, working with the animals — well, primarily with the savanna monkeys, or the green monkeys, as they are commonly called. Those are the fussy little ones you often see trotting about through the tall grass like a pack of dogs. Perhaps a physician of the mind or a shaman could listen to me, observe me, and come up with a few guesses. My skin is dark; my features bear the unmistakable characteristics of an African ancestor or two, somewhere in the past. Certainly that must have something to do with my obsession with African wildlife, this learned physician might theorize, but I doubt he would be correct in this assessment.

No, it was simply my time to do it. Something deep within me whispered it to me, and I have learned to tell the difference between this voice and the voice of mischievous whim. It was the voice of my karma.

But like all times, this time had ended. Move on, the voice of my karma whispered to me; move on.

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I said good-bye to the herds of antelope and zebras, grazing, flowing liquidly through the grass, watching me warily, always relaxed, always ready to bolt.

I said good-bye to the grass, the trees, the shrubbery, and the many insects and snakes therein, which seemed to me to be a part of these sweet, slow, trembling life-forms. And of course I said good-bye to the monkeys, particularly to my special tribe of savannas. One of the little ones shouted "Bye-bye" back to me. What a shock! All this time I hadn't known they could talk. It seemed to me a portent.

Someone else must have spent a great deal of time here before me, teaching them human speech. English, in fact. This brought to mind a fusillade of questions going every which way at once. Had they been operated on? Or perhaps genetically engineered that way? Or were they just, through nature, evolving along those lines? Still, someone had to have taught him "bye-bye." Who? And could he say more than "bye-bye"? Yes, I was certain that he could; otherwise, why waste the time and effort and then be satisfied with that? Bye-bye?

And who? Who had spent all of that time and energy just to achieve this bizarre result? I had concentrated my efforts largely on improving their health and comfort, setting up their communal apartment house with the automatic medicated water-supply units, teaching them to live there, a not-difficult but nevertheless time-consuming chore. Whenever I grew tired or bored, I just reminded myself of the many terminally ill humans who had offered themselves as experimental subjects in order to improve the conditions of these, our gentle, helpless brothers of the wilds. From this I drew a sweet surge of emotion that renewed my vigor. I was so proud to be a member of the human race. Could anything ever match its glory?

But while I had approached the situation as might a doctor, had not my unknown collaborator approached it as an artist? And which was more important to my furry brothers: their continued good health, or the acquisition of the ability to speak? By all the gods within, what a wonderful notion! My mind was spinning with wild thoughts, new ideas. What other miracles would such a mind as my unknown accomplice's create?

And of course now I was tempted to stay and try to dredge up more information about this, and also to find out who it was who. . . .

But no, I realized, that would certainly ruin it. My voice said move on.

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Let go. Accept the gift, and cherish it for the moment, and then set it down in the tall grass to offer for a human to dwell on and cling to one of them. Move on. And on.

I went inside my lab. "Get me out of here," I said.

"Where?" it asked, quite naturally.

"I don't care," I said. "You choose."

The control was cursing me in a low, monotonous voice as I entered the shower compartment. It was still cursing me when I came out. But when I looked outside, I could see that my lab had taken off and was already quite high above the trees. Far below I could observe the tiny figures endlessly moving on the plain.

"How 'bout Spain?" I said, more to shut the computer up than anything else. Then I went into the sleeper and slept.

Much later I awoke much refreshed, and dialed the wall clear. To my astonishment, a garish red neon light was flashing outside; I hadn't felt us set down. "Sex Is Most Fun," it winked knowingly.

"What is this, anyhow?" I shouted at my computer. " 'Sex is most fun'? Is this Spain, you retarded superplastic putz?"

"It's The Fun Club. It's world-famous. At least it says it is. I picked up the commercial signals it sends out, and decided to stop off on the way. You've been cooped up with a tribe of monkeys for six months." Its arguments were most persuasive. "You are human, you know. After all, isn't sex fun?"

"How would you know, anyway? Besides, it's hard to explain to a computer. Particularly a malfunctioning one," I said with some cruelty. "But yes, under certain circumstances, sex is fun. But I don't like to frequent these dives. The ambience is — well, disturbing. It takes awhile to get my nervous system tuned back to normal functioning after these kinds of experiences."

It said nothing, leaving me to accept the silence or blather on nervously.

"Whereabouts?"

"Pardon?"

"I said, 'Whereabouts?' Where are we? You? I? Where? You decided to stop off on the way to Spain. Where on the way?"

"California," it said. Did I detect a tremble in its voice? No, it must have been my imagination.

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I sat down. "California," I said, quite calmly. "You've taken me to California."

"Yes," it said, "I have."

"To Sin City," I said. "To the place I hate most in the world. On the way to Spain? Oh no. Far from Spain. Very, very far from Spain. A zillion miles from Spain."

A vision of quiet beaches and elegant little brightly colored Mediterranean cars bobbing on the deep blue-green of the ocean or floating above the lush deep-green garden walkways flashed through my mind's eye.

"It's not that far. Not a zillion miles," it said. "It's exactly. . . ." And it began to tell me the distance from here to various Spanish cities. Finally, when it realized I wasn't listening, it trailed off.

"What are you going to do?" it asked in a low voice — afraid?

"What do you think I'm going to do?" I said. "I'm going to run into the Sex Is Fun club and tear off all my clothes and ravish ten women, and then we'll go to Spain."

"I think ten would be too many." It seemed genuinely concerned.

Well, of course I went into the club. Just to get a drink, and wind down a bit. After all, I was here, wasn't I? California. Who didn't love it? Who didn't hate it? Disneyland alone was now larger than most European countries; and California, which now comprised the entire western half of North Amer, was still growing. All the power was here. The wealth was here. The fun was here. And I was here. Of course I went in.

II

SEATED INCONSPICUOUSLY, I hoped, in a corner of the rowdy yet dimly lit Fun Barroom, I listened to the robowaiter spout off a long list of the latest drugs to be indulged in. I barely recognized a fourth of them.

Still blinking in the pulsating red light, still reeling from the oily, snaky music squirming all around me, my mind could not seem to move fast enough to sort out the drugs I was being offered.

"Something light, perhaps — certainly no psychedelics — something to energize me a bit for an hour or so and then fade away, leaving no trace of hangover. A tonic, perhaps. Do you have something like that?"

The servobot regarded me for a moment in silence, then it said: "It

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makes no difference to me what you humans drink. No matter what it is, you'll only get all fired up and make a fool out of yourself for an hour or two, and then piss it all away, anyhow. The choice is yours, dearie; I'm not about to be the one to poison you."

Flabbergasted by its audacity, I merely sat there before it, alas speechless.

The two of us stared into each other's eyes. It's no good trying to stare down a robot.

Mercifully, a strange voice cut through our dilemma. I remember thinking at the time that the quality of it was soft, but quite firm and self-assured in its tone.

"Enough of that, you insulting lackey; bring us two whiskeys, and short-circuit your voice box before I have it removed." The roboservant moved off, grumbling to itself.

The man, a slender fellow dressed in an odd archaic-looking gray outfit, turned to me and held out his hand.

Wondering what to do with it, I arose and took it in both of mine and placed it over my heart.

"No," he said in his soft voice. "If I may, sir, allow me to instruct you in the ancient art of the handshake. I am resurrecting it."

He pumped my hand up and down while squeezing it. I found this vaguely unpleasant. A portent. I should have listened to my inner voice, but it spoke so softly, and the lights and the music were so distracting.

"I cannot bear to see a man insulted in my presence," he told me. "You see, I am also resurrecting the ancient art of politeness and chivalry. I am a member of a club: the New Knights of the Golden Light.

"If I may," he said, and then he sat down.

"What is whiskey?" I said, still worried about my drink. "Is it a strong drug?"

"Strong enough, my friend; alcohol is a man's drink. It'll rot your stomach out."

Obviously, he was joking. A man's drink? "Is it hormonal?"

He shook his head at me, bemused and at the same time seemingly charmed by my lack of sophistication. Then he leaned forward to deliver a confidence. "It is the sacrament of the New Knights of the Golden Light. It promotes vigor and manly thought and action."

What was all this manliness? I wondered. Just then the robowaiter

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returned and set down our drinks, still grumbling to itself in a low tone of voice.

"Absolute silence is what I demand from you," my companion said to the robot. Then, as if reading my mind, he said, "To the manliness of men and the womanliness of women," and drank it down in one swallow. As did I. Strange. Medicinal. It burned the throat, but immediately sent a pleasant, warm flush rushing through the stomach. It tickled the brain. A few moments later, and I was feeling giddy.

"Doubles! Two more, you tin swine," he shouted at the servobot.

"Shall we invite those two luscious courtesans over for a bout of two-back beast in the rain forest steam room?" he whispered to me, pointing at the two naked young ladies sitting at the next table, who grinned and waved to us — "Or would you prefer a male courtesan equally skilled?" He pointed at one of the young men.

Our drinks arrived, and down they went, to a shout of "Down the hatch," whatever that meant. An awful, sickly taste for a moment was again swiftly followed by heat and giddiness. I was starting to feel full of enthusiasm, but it was only enthusiasm for myself that alcohol brought. Who was this clown sitting at my table, dominating the events of my evening?

"Two more," he shouted, "and be quick."

"Alas, I cannot," I answered him. "My temperament will not allow it. I have just spent several months in the wilds helping our animal brothers, and now I plan a week in glorious Spain in quiet meditation, listening to my inner voice, until it whispers to me what direction next to take in life.

"Besides," I added, unnecessarily, "I have no interest in courtesans."

For a while we sat in sullen silence, he thinking his thoughts, and I mine. The drinks arrived and were downed. More silence.

Then suddenly he slammed down his glass. "You insult me," he said, still in his soft, sweet voice. "You insult the courtesans, ladies and gentlemen alike, who have dedicated their very lives to bringing joy to the horny. In doing so you have insulted all womankind. And mankind as well," he added as an afterthought.

"Why not?" I said. The whiskey was making me bold. "Insults are free. Have some more." I made a series of obscene gestures to him and then toward the two naked girls at the next table, who smiled and fired them right back.

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My drinking companion buried his head in his hands and mumbled. "No, no. It's too much to bear. It goes on and on, growing and proliferating till it grinds us all under beneath its — its whatever."

"What," I said, "ish it?"

"It is a monstrous disease called discourtesy. It is spreading, sir, all over the world."

"So what?" I said, all fired up. "The way I see it, your politeness is mere deception. It's pretending to feel one way when you really feel another. Why bother? Let's all speak the truth, always, and to hell with courtesy."

He leaped to his feet, knocking over his chair. "What?" he shouted. "He has the audacity to insult politeness itself? And in the presence of a Knight of the Golden Light? I cannot bear it, and I shall not bear it."

He worked off one of his ridiculous gray gloves and slapped me in the face with it. I was stunned. Oh, it didn't hurt, of course, but the thought that one human being would strike another was so alien to me that I just could not accept that it had actually happened.

"Now we must fight a duel," he said, as he righted his chair and ordered two more whiskeys.

Then he spent the next quarter of an hour trying to explain to me what a duel was. Finally he concluded with, "Nathaniel Avers, at your service. My seconds will call you in the morning." And offered me his hand. This time I remembered to pump it up and down.

"Look, I have to leave for Spain. I have too much to do to fight a duel. I'm a doctor, an engineer, a sociologist. I plan to study the arts. I have projects in Italy, Africa, and in the Lesser U.S. I don't have time to be polite or to fight duels."

"Well, then, we'll go outside and fight it right now. Please," he said — and he was pleading with me now; tears were suddenly there in his eyes — "please fight a duel with me; it won't take long at all. You won't regret it; believe me. And it will give both of us a chance to prove our manhood."

What did he mean by that? I glanced down briefly between my legs (still there?).

I should have left immediately. And I knew I should have left immediately. But whiskey is an evil drug that leads to impulsive, overly sentimental bursts of behavior. For once in my life, I decided to humor the man and be polite. It was, of course, a mistake.

Outside in the rain, I looked to the medical robot crew for assurance.

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Nothing could go wrong with the Fun Club medical emergency team standing by, he had promised me. And of course they had agreed without a word of protest. What did the servobots care if humans drugged themselves into oblivion and then fought with each other?

And now here we were in the rain, waiting. At first it was all a joke to me. The whiskey was responsible for that, I'll bet. But then he was explaining the strange, awkward tool he had been carrying in his belt, and suddenly nothing seemed quite so funny anymore.

"It's a gun," he said. "See, you hold it like this and depress this lever, and it throws out a very fast projectile of steel that cuts right through your flesh. Here, take it; I have another."

I held out my hand. It was heavy. Cold. Wet. I wanted to protest, to shout, to throw it down, but something wouldn't let me. Perhaps it was that ugly drug; perhaps it was some unknown force inside myself.

"It will hurt," he said in his soft voice.

Suddenly I was filled with rage. He had driven me to this, he with his soft, insinuating ways, with his sneaky politeness that pretended to honor you, but all of the time was planning to harm you.

"It will hurt you," I said in a tone of voice I had never heard myself use before.

Yes, he had led me to this, and now nothing in my life would ever be the same again.

"It's going to hurt you," I said, "because you're a loser and a coward. Because all of your chivalry and politeness and talk of manhood is a facade to hide your empty, quaking heart."

Now, numb from the whiskey and anger, we paced off the distance in the rain and turned as if we were figures in a dream and I were somewhere else, dreaming it all.

And he was afraid. He shot and missed. I smiled and took aim. Frantically, he shot again twice, and missed both times. Then I shot him square in the chest.

Suddenly it was a dream no more. I almost felt the hideous impact. He jerked, somewhat after the fact, and strangely enough, when he fell, he fell forward and not backward as you would have supposed. A fraction of time, and the emergency team of bots was working on him. It was raining hard. Everything was happening hard. A fraction of time. Time is the thing.

* * *

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III

IT WAS some three weeks later when the judgment was delivered.

Nathaniel, apparently completely recovered from the wound, smiled at me, nodded, polite as always. Actually, his smile was almost beatific. Had he proved his manhood somehow? Or was he still doing it? I turned my attention to the judge. An elderly man well known to me, and everyone else as well. A genius, a great physicist, philosopher, and yogi, he had volunteered himself for this repulsive chore.

"You will accept my decision implicitly in this matter, for no solution may be reached unless it be through your free will."

"How could anyone doubt your wisdom, oh great yogi?" I said. This was not politeness. This was honest awe. He had earned it.

"I shall accept it like a man," Nathaniel said, gentleman to the last.

"Very well, then." The old man smiled, rubbed his hands together, he had that enthusiasm that marks the greats. No matter what unpleasantness it was, he was eager to get to work on it.

"Neither of you is to blame for this incident, least of all you, Habad," he said, nodding to me. "Nonetheless, you have brought intense ugliness into the consciousness of our world, and now you both carry it forever with you. Will it spread? Let's not take the chance. The sentence must be death.

"You must both live out your lives before this time occurs, back somewhere in the primitive past, where your brutal thought patterns won't pollute the group-mind. The sentence is to be carried out immediately. Any questions?"

Shocked, I stammered, "But what about you, sir? Has not this ugliness touched your consciousness as well as —"

"Of course, of course," he cut me off excitedly. "I sentence all three of us to death, to life in the vicious, primitive past. Shall we go to the time chambers? But wait, take one last look. No — not around you, within you. That consciousness will diminish and shift until it fits into the past. You see, it's hard for me to explain it to you, but time is consciousness."

And with that he cheerfully led us into the chambers and out of this beautiful world forever.

* * *

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Epilogue

SO HERE I am, as are the other two. Somewhere. But I wouldn't recognize them if I saw them now. We are changing, changing so fast. My memories are flying away, or dissolving into soup. And what few remain, this primitive mind cannot comprehend. It shrinks and shrinks to fit the environment.

And here I am in the cruel past where humanity kills the gentle animals for food and rages each against the other for all manner of material gain. And worst of all, most ironic, as they cut each other's throats, everyone tries to be polite about it, gentlemen and ladies all. Ah well, I'll drink to that. Down the hatch.

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

THE SALT PRODUCERS

WHEN I was young, in the far-off distant days before antibiotics, we had a home remedy for any cut, scrape or abrasion. In order to prevent infection, we smeared the spot with tincture of iodine — that is, a solution of iodine in alcohol.

It was ground into me that iodine was the universal anti-infection treatment. It stung on application (ouch, ouch) but that was good, for I always felt, as a child, that the stinging was a sign that all the germs were being killed.

But time has passed and home remedies have changed. My dear wife, Janet, is, of course, an M.D., and so she is up on all the latest anti-infection stuff. Her greatest happiness in life is doctoring me for any minor problem I may have. (It's not *my* greatest happiness, but I love her dearly and am willing to endure the inconvenience if it will make her happy.) In any case, she plasters me with a variety of ointments and lotions and antibiotic creams.

However, in my medicine cabinet I insist on having a little bottle of tincture of iodine, and any time I can hide a cut or scrape or abrasion from dear Janet's eagle-eye, I smear it with iodine so that I can feel that healthy germ-killing sting.

And because I used it the other day for exactly that purpose (and was caught by Janet, who gave me Lecture 3-A on the subject), I thought that, since I occasionally write an essay on one or another of the chemical elements, I ought to do one on iodine. Here goes —

We won't begin with iodine, however, but with hydrochloric acid.

The medieval alchemists discovered three strong mineral acids which proved far more powerful in bringing about chemical changes than was the comparatively weak acetic acid. Acetic acid was the

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active principle of vinegar and was the best the ancients could do in this direction. Two of the strong mineral acids were sulfuric acid and nitric acid, and the third to be discovered was hydrochloric acid.

We don't really know for sure who discovered the acid or when, but the first clear description of the preparation of hydrochloric acid came in a book written about 1612 by the German alchemist Andreas Libau (1560-1616), better known by the Latinized version of his name, Libavius.

Naturally, he didn't call it hydrochloric acid, since that name only appeared in the 19th Century, after modern chemical nomenclature had been invented. He called it "spiritus salis," which is Latin for "spirit of salt." He called it that because he formed it from salt and water, heated in the presence of clay. It was a "spirit" because it was easily vaporized, whereas salt itself was not.

In later years, hydrochloric acid was called "marine acid" because the salt from which it was formed could be obtained from sea water. The salt could, as well, be obtained from brine (salt-saturated water found here and there on land) so that it was also called "muriatic acid" from the Latin word for "brine."

We now skip a century and a half—

In 1774, the Swedish chemist Karl Wilhelm Scheele (1742-1786) heated muriatic acid with a mineral called "pyrolusite," which contained what we would today call "manganese dioxide."

When he did that, he produced a vapor with a suffocating odor that made him cough and which he found "oppressive." He worked with it anyway (and with various other poisonous vapors, which may account for his early death at the age of 44). He found that the vapor dissolved slightly in water, attacked metals, bleached the green out of leaves and the color out of flowers.

Here is what had happened. Muriatic acid has molecules made up of one hydrogen atom and one chlorine atom (which is why it is now called hydrochloric acid). Oxygen from the manganese dioxide combined with the hydrogen atom, liberating the chlorine atom. The chlorine atoms so liberated combined in pairs to form chlorine molecules, and these formed vapors of the gaseous element chlorine. In short, Scheele had discovered chlorine.

Scheele, however, although one of the greatest chemists of history was, by all odds, the unluckiest. He was the first to isolate about half a dozen chemical elements but got credit for not a single one. Either his publication was delayed, allow-

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ing someone else to get in ahead of him, or the credit went to co-workers, or *something*.

In the case of chlorine, his report was first and there was no co-worker to confuse things, but Scheele lost out anyway because he did not recognize the vapors he produced as being an element. He accepted a theory, evolved in 1700, which considered combustion to involve the loss of something called "phlogiston." He therefore called his vapor, produced by the combustion of muriatic acid, "dephlogisticated muriatic acid."

Just about the time that Scheele was isolating chlorine, the British chemist Joseph Priestley (1733-1804) discovered oxygen. (Scheele had discovered it first, but his paper on the subject was disgracefully delayed by the publisher and he lost the credit.) The French chemist Antoine Laurent Lavoisier (1743-1794) had by 1778 showed that combustion was not due to the loss of phlogiston, but to the gain of oxygen.

This meant that Scheele had not deprived muriatic acid of phlogiston but had added oxygen to it. Dephlogisticated muriatic acid came to be called "oxymuriatic acid." Scheele's vapor was still thought not to be an element but to be a loose combination of muriatic acid and oxygen.

Lavoisier was of the opinion that all acids contained oxygen (which was why he called the gas "oxygen" from the Greek words for "acid-producer"). He therefore considered both muriatic acid and oxymuriatic acid to contain oxygen.

The matter was investigated by the British chemist Humphry Davy (1778-1829), and by 1808 he had come to the conclusion that muriatic acid did *not* contain oxygen, that it was the hydrogen content that combined with oxygen, and that Scheele's vapor did not contain oxygen either but was an element. That is, the vapor could not be broken down to anything simpler and more fundamental.

Because the vapor was greenish in color, Davy called it "chlorine," from the Greek word for "green." He maintained that muriatic acid was composed of molecules that contained hydrogen and chlorine, so that it came to be called "hydrogen chloride" or "hydrochloric acid." Because all this was correct, it is Davy who is given credit for the discovery of chlorine, and not Scheele.

Not everyone was convinced by Davy's reasoning, however. In particular, the Swedish chemist Jöns Jakob Berzelius (1779-1848) continued to maintain that Davy's chlorine was actually an oxide of some sort. Berzelius was the most prominent chemist of his day and was

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virtually the dictator of chemical belief. As long as he refused to accept Davy's thesis, that thesis remained uncertain.

That brings us to a French chemist, Bernard Courtois (1777-1838).

Courtois was the son of a manufacturer of saltpeter in Dijon, and while he received a good chemical education, he took over his father's business in 1804 and was what we might call an "industrial chemist."

Manufacturing saltpeter was not a trivial occupation at this time. Saltpeter, or "potassium nitrate" in chemical terminology, is an essential component of gunpowder. The other components, sulfur and charcoal, were easily and abundantly available, but saltpeter was not.

Courtois took over the firm in the middle of the Napoleonic wars, and gunpowder was desperately needed by France. Great Britain was the chief enemy and the British navy controlled the sea. The best sources of saltpeter were abroad, and as these had become unavailable, Courtois's business was in deep trouble.

He attempted to get the necessary saltpeter from seaweed obtained from the Channel shores of France. He burned the seaweed and dissolved the saltpeter out of the ash with water. The water, however, also dissolved various components of the ash that were undesirable impurities. To get rid of these impurities, Courtois added a bit of sulfuric acid, and this precipitated the impurities which Courtois could then filter off.

What Cortois didn't know, however, and in fact what no one at the time knew, was that the seaweed contained tiny quantities of compounds containing a hitherto unknown substance.

Toward the end of 1811, Courtois seems to have added a bit too much sulfuric acid and, to his surprise, obtained a violet vapor that had an irritating odor much like chlorine and that solidified on cold objects to form nearly black crystals.

Courtois studied these crystals and found that they would combine with hydrogen, phosphorus and metals. They also combined with ammonia to form an explosive substance (one that was not well enough behaved to substitute for gunpowder, however). It did not combine readily with carbon or oxygen. In all these respects, the new substance rather resembled chlorine.

Courtois also found that heating the crystals strongly did not break them down to anything simpler. He therefore suspected he had a new element, but he was forced to drop his investigation. For one

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thing, he had no money and no time. It took all his efforts to support himself and his family with his near bankrupt factory.

For another thing, he doubted his own chemical ability to handle a problem as difficult as that of determining whether a strange new substance was an element or not. He discontinued his investigations, therefore, and did not even publish those observations he had made. In fact, in his whole life, Coûrtois never published a scientific paper.

In July 1812, however, he passed on the information he had gathered to two local chemists of repute: to Nicholas Clément (1778-1841) and his collaborator, Charles Bernard Desormes (1777-1862). They continued the research and, when they reported their work to the Institut de France on November 19, 1813, they gave Courtois full credit for the discovery. Clément, having studied the properties of the new substance in great detail, found, like Courtois, that they resembled those of chlorine. He therefore announced that the vapor was a new element.

By that time, other chemists were working with the new substance, including Humphry Davy and a French chemist, Joseph Louis Gay-Lussac (1778-1850). Both agreed that the substance was a new element, resembling chlorine. Gay-Lussac named the element from the violet color of its vapor. The Greek word for "violet" is "ion," and "violet-like" is "iodes." Adopting the "-ine" ending of chlorine, we end with "iodine."

There was some argument over priority between Davy and Gay-Lussac, mostly as a matter of politics. After all, Davy was the preeminent British chemist and Gay-Lussac the leading French chemist, and the two nations were in a deadly war. However the discovery went to neither but is universally credited to Courtois, which is as it should be.

The data which showed iodine to be an element was so strong that its elementary nature was soon universally accepted by chemists. The fact that it was an element made it seem far more likely that the very similar substance, chlorine, was an element also. By 1820, even that very stubborn and dictatorial chemist Berzelius gave in.

None of this did Courtois any financial good, however. His saltpeter business finally failed, and he tried to make a living out of preparing and selling iodine, but that brought in very little. In 1831, he was awarded a prize of 6000 francs for his discovery, but that was soon spent, and in 1838, he died in total poverty.

The story is not yet over, for we

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must consider yet another French chemist, Antoine Jérôme Balard (1802-1876), who in 1824 was a young assistant at a pharmaceutical school in Montpellier.

He was interested in trying to find new sources of iodine, and, for the purpose, was studying different types of plants that grew in salt marshes. He extracted the ash of these plants and boiled them down, and then discovered that when he added certain chemicals, the liquid turned brown.

He investigated the brown material and finally obtained a reddish liquid that, like chlorine and iodine, had a choking, cough producing odor. He studied its properties and found them to be more or less midway between those of chlorine and iodine. It was darker than chlorine in color but lighter than iodine. It had the same chemical properties but seemed more chemically active than iodine and less chemically active than chlorine.

For a while, Balard thought that what he had was a compound of chlorine and iodine — "iodine chloride," so to speak — but he was unable to break down the new substance and to produce either iodine or chlorine from it. He therefore announced it as a new element and named it "muride" from the brine in which the plants producing it had grown.

The matter was studied by a group from the French Academy, including Gay-Lussac, and they refused to accept the name, perhaps because it reminded them of the outmoded name "muriatic acid." Instead, they turned to the strong and unpleasant odor of the vapor and called it "bromine" from the Greek word for "stench."

The discovery of bromine had the usual number of near misses that most discoveries have.

In 1825, a young German chemistry student, Carl Löwig (1803-1890), had obtained a red liquid from the dissolved contents of a salt spring. He brought it with him into the laboratories of a notable German chemist, Leopold Gmelin (1788-1853), and Gmelin at once suggested that he study the liquid carefully to see if it was a new element.

Löwig did so, but before he had come to a decision, Balard's paper announcing the discovery of bromine had appeared. However, Löwig went on to a long and successful chemical career, much of it engaged in the study of bromine compounds, so that his near miss was not particularly tragic.

More dramatic was the fate of still another young German chemist, Justus von Liebig (1803-1873). He had obtained a sample of a red liquid even before Löwig had, and he had carefully tested it, put it in a

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vial, labelled it, and added it to the reagent shelf in his laboratory.

When the news of the discovery of bromine came out, Liebig rushed to his shelf, got down the vial, tested its contents again and found that he had had pure bromine sitting there for many months. Then he stared at the label he had written —which said "iodine chloride." Liebig, however, went on to become one of the great organic chemists of all time so here, too, the tragedy is not very great.

It was obvious that the properties of bromine lay between that of chlorine and iodine. A German chemist, Johann Wolfgang Döbereiner (1780-1849), reduced this to numbers, however. He noticed that the atomic weight of bromine was just about midway between that of chlorine and iodine. If the atomic weight of chlorine and iodine are added and the sum is divided by two, one gets the answer 81. The atomic weight of bromine is about 80.

Döbereiner noticed this same thing in connection with other groups of three elements with similar properties. There is calcium, strontium, and barium, for instance. The atomic weights of calcium and barium, added together and divided by two, is about 89. The atomic weight of strontium is about 88.

Then there is sulfur, selenium, and tellurium, which have similar properties. The atomic weight of sulfur and tellurium, added together and divided by two, is about 80, and the atomic weight of selenium is about 79.

Döbereiner suggested in 1829 that the elements existed in groups of three, which he called triads.

This was important. By Döbereiner's time, over fifty elements were known, and their properties varied all over the lot. They were a disorderly bunch, and it is virtually an instinct with scientists to try to find order wherever they can.

Döbereiner's triads were the first suggestion of order in connection with the elements, and that suggestion had been advanced, not surprisingly, soon after bromine had been discovered, since chlorine, bromine, and iodine made up the most noticeable and clearcut example of a triad.

The notion of triads did not flourish, however, for several reasons. First, though there were over fifty elements known, thirty remained yet to be discovered, and their absence left holes that made any orderly arrangement of elements difficult. Second, the atomic weights of many elements were not yet correctly known so that the notion of triads would fail even where they existed and might show up where they did not exist. Third, the

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true order of the elements is so subtle that something as simple as triads will not do.

Nevertheless, Döbereiner's suggestion stirred the imagination of chemists, and others began to tackle the job of finding order in the apparently disorderly mob of elements.

In 1869, forty years after the triads, the Russian chemist Dmitri Ivanovich Mendeléev (1834-1907) finally worked out the true order of the elements in the form of a "periodic table." This was the greatest chemical discovery between Lavoisier's elucidation of the nature of combustion in 1778 and the discovery of radioactivity by the French chemist Antoine Henri Becquerel (1852-1908) in 1896.

The triads were sufficient to make it possible to refer to some groups of elements by a general name. Thus, chlorine combines with sodium to form sodium chloride, or ordinary table salt. Bromine and iodine combine with sodium to form sodium bromide and sodium iodide, respectively, and each of these compounds resembles salt in many ways. For this reason, chlorine, bromine and iodine are referred to as a group as the "halogens," from Greek words meaning "salt-producers."

Are chlorine, bromine and iodine the only halogens there are?

The answer is, no! Chlorine has the smallest atomic weight of the three, but there is a halogen with a still smaller atomic weight that is called "fluorine."

Fluorine carries on the progression. Whereas iodine is a solid at ordinary temperatures, with a boiling point at 184 C, bromine is a liquid, with a boiling point at 59 C. Chlorine and fluorine are both gases at ordinary temperatures, with a boiling point of -35 C for chlorine and -187 for the smaller fluorine.

Bromine is more active, chemically, than iodine is, while chlorine is more active still, and fluorine is most active of all. Fluorine is, in fact, the most active of all the chemical elements, combining most eagerly with other atoms, and being pried loose with the greatest difficulty.

The existence of fluorine in certain compounds seemed certain rather early on, but it was a long time before anyone actually managed to pry it loose and prepare it as an elemental gas. The task was carried through by the French chemist Ferdinand Frédéric Henri Moissan (1852-1907) in 1886, and in 1906 he received a Nobel Prize in chemistry for the feat. It's a very dramatic story, but I won't tell it here, because I told it in an earlier essay a quarter-century ago.*

*See DEATH IN THE LABORATORY, F&SF, September 1965.

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There is a fifth halogen also, at the other end of the list, beyond iodine. This came to be known in 1914, when the British physicist Henry Gwyn-Jeffreys Moseley (1887-1915) worked out the concept of the "atomic number."

This put the finishing touch on the periodic table by giving each element an integral number. This meant that it was known exactly where each element fit in the table. It made it possible to know that between two particular known elements, there could be no other — or that there could be one, or two, new elements.

The atomic number of fluorine is 9, that of chlorine is 17, that of bromine is 35, and that of iodine is 53. The periodic table is so arranged that there must be a fifth halogen at atomic number 85, but no element was known there.

By the time of Moseley's discovery, this was not surprising. Radioactivity had been discovered, and it was clear that all the elements with atomic numbers above 83 were radioactive and had no stable isotopes.

Elements 90 and 92 (thorium and uranium, respectively) were nearly stable and therefore existed in the Earth's crust in considerable quantity. As they broke down, they formed other elements with atomic numbers higher than 83. These existed only in traces, but which could be detected by their radioactive radiations.

In 1931, an American chemist, Fred Allison, making use of technique he had devised called "magneto-optics," reported having detected the fifth halogen and named it "alabamine." He proved to be mistaken, however, and its place in the periodic table remained unoccupied. The fifth halogen continued to be referred to as simply "element 85" or as "eka-iodine." ("Eka" is Sanskrit for "one" so that eka-iodine is "one" beyond iodine.)

If element 85 cannot be detected among the breakdown products of uranium or thorium, it might be possible to make it in the laboratory. Suppose you start with bismuth, which has an atomic number of 83, and bombard it with alpha particles, which are helium nuclei and have an atomic number of 2. If some alpha particles fuse with bismuth nuclei, the combined nuclei would have an atomic number of 85.

In 1940, a team of physicists at the University of California, including the Italian-American Emilio Segrè (1905-1989), tried the experiment and thought they might have formed eka-iodine. However, World War II was raging in Europe, and the chances of American involvement were increasing steadily. That

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particular project, then, was put to one side.

In 1947, the project was begun again and eka-iodine was formed in tiny traces. It was named "astatine" from a Greek word meaning "unstable" and unstable it was indeed. Its most nearly stable isotope was astatine-210, and it had a half-life of only 8.3 hours.

Suppose we consider only the four stable halogens: fluorine, chlorine, bromine and iodine. In general, though with some exceptions, small atoms are more common in the Universe than large atoms are. It is not surprising, then, that in the Earth's crust, fluorine is the most common of the halogens, next is chlorine, next bromine and finally iodine.

In parts per million by weight, the figures are fluorine, 700; chlorine, 200; bromine, 3; and iodine, 0.3. The most common compounds of the halogens are those with sodium and potassium and they are quite soluble. On the whole, then, these compounds tend to be washed out of the land and into the sea. (That's why the ocean is salty.)

Iodine is, of course, far less common in the sea than chlorine is. The amount of sodium iodide in the sea is only 1/8000 of the amount of sodium chloride. You'd have to poke through 500 tons of seawater to get out an ounce of iodine, and this is not really a practical process.

This could seem frightening since iodine is essential to life. (So is chlorine, but there is plenty of that. Fluorine is useful, in tiny quantities, in tooth formation only, and bromine is, as far as we know, not essential to life).

To be sure, iodine is needed only in small quantities. The human body contains only about 14 milligrams of iodine (about 1/2000 of an ounce), mostly in the thyroid gland, but how do we manage to get even that small amount?

Fortunately, iodine is also essential for sea life, and the plant world of the ocean, including sea weed, filters it out of the water and concentrates it in its own tissues. (That's why Courtois managed to get iodine out of seaweed; he couldn't have done it out of sea water.)

This means that seafood contains ample iodine for our needs.

But what about inland places where seafood is not common? Again, fortunately, the salt spray of the ocean dries in the sun to tiny particles of salts, including sodium iodide, which can be blown far inland by the winds. Small amounts of iodine compounds are deposited in the soil and therefore are absorbed by land plants, from which it reaches us.

There are places, however, where

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Coming Soon

Next month: The fiction feature is David Brin's "Dr. Pak's Preschool"; the non-fiction is Harlan Ellison on *The Handmaid's Tale*. The July issue is on sale May 31.

Soon: New stories from Brian W. Aldiss, Dean Whitlock, Karen Joy Fowler, Sheri Tepper, Philip Jose Farmer and many others.

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iodine content is consistently low — places such as in the Alps, the Rocky Mountains, the American midwest, and so on. Iodine shortages are endemic there. The result, then, is that the thyroid grows and produces goiters with all sorts of unpleasant symptoms.

Once iodine was discovered, however, it was soon found to be helpful in the treatment of goiter. Eventually, small quantities of sodium iodide were added to the water supplies of cities that suffered from shortages. Sodium iodide could also be added in small quantities to salt, forming "iodized salt."

And iodine could also be used as an antiseptic, even today, by backward people such as myself who trust the iodine sting more than the antibiotic lotion.

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Ray Aldridge ("The Cold Cage," February 1990) returns with a compelling new story about the world Dilvermoon, whose citizens seek escape by adopting beast-like personas . . .

HYENA EYES

By Ray Aldridge

THENDARD LOAM WAS larger than any human being should be. Cayten Borlavinda always saw him with a small start of amazement, though she had known him for many years. He was nearly three meters tall, and almost as wide. He had three hearts, two sets of lungs, and remote boosterpumps in each massive limb. His skin was charcoal black; his hair, which rose in high, spiraling twists, was bone white.

Cayten wandered aimlessly through Thendard's loft, which had once been an autofac. A few dead robots still stood on the steel floor, towering above the other furnishings. During some long-ago fit of domesticity, Thendard had painted the robots in fanciful pastels — pinks, aquas, powder blues — so that they seemed like enormous toys. She leaned against one of them and touched her forehead to the cool metal, which still smelled faintly of machine oil.

"Well, we must have him killed, Cayten," Thendard said. Thendard

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filled an oversize powerchair, his flesh spilling over the arms in dark, shiny billows. His great face bore an expression of painful concern.

She stood back and shook her head. "No. I'm not quite ready for that." Her face felt stiff, as though her tears had been not ordinary salt but some strong preservative solution, effective against decay and further emotion. Her eyes were dry now. Pseudoskin covered her injured cheek; the med-unit had assured her that there would be no scars to be repaired.

"A joke, Cayten, please." Thendard shifted his bulk, and the chair squeaked, a small, desperately overloaded sound.

"I still want to punish him."

Thendard shook his head. "I'm sorry. I wouldn't have thought it of him. To think that Genoaro would hurt you.... He's always been a strange man — you knew that when you contracted with him — but always a gentle man, too."

"You know why, Thendard. It's the Level."

"Ah, the Level! Yes, the Level is bad for some. Dilvermoon may be the sweetest melon in the universe, as they say, but the Level might be a layer of rot just under her rind." Thendard was solemn. "Yes, Dilvermoon suffers a disease, much like all of us who dwell within her — and Genoaro is no exception."

She loved Thendard, but sometimes she had no patience with his pompous epigrams. He delivered them so relentlessly. "Please, Thendard, not now," she said wearily.

"Oh...." His brows drew together; his mouth pursed. "Sorry. Well, what can I do?"

"Give me a place to stay, for a while. Give me advice when I'm ready to hear it. Please." She knew her voice was harsh, but she couldn't help it. Thendard was a beaster, too, and so partook of Genoaro's sins; for all that Thendard was a sweet and guileless man.

"Of course," Thendard said quickly. "Of course."

Down in the artists' quarter, the Bo'eme, she shared a renovated warehouse with Genoaro. Their workshops were at opposite ends of that echoing space; their living area in the middle. She had been having a late breakfast alone, when she heard a crash from his workshop, followed by a truncated sob. She went to investigate, with caution and more than a touch of fear, though she could not yet consciously admit to that

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emotion in connection with Genoaro Maryal.

She found him slumped cross-legged in a corner, toying with the pieces of a broken obsidian dagger.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"It won't come right," he muttered. "This is the sixth casting, and it won't come right."

She knelt beside him. "What happened this time?"

"The same. The annealing. . . ."

"This is for the Linean embassy?" She touched a fragment, still warm from the annealing oven. Cayten did not pretend to understand the intricacies of his craft, which was the making of ceremonial glass weapons. He labored not only under the handicap of a delicate, unforgiving technique, but also under a thorny thicket of political and religious requirements. But he was very good; his knives and swords and axes were much sought after by collectors. He attracted many commissions from the diplomatic enclaves of Dilvermoon; his work was elegant, fragile, expensive — ideal qualities in a gift of state.

"Yes. For one of their more repulsive rituals, I'm told. They need it by the end of the month." Genoaro's voice was thick with some scornful emotion. He stood up, a tall man with large, rough hands. His cheekbones were as sharp as his knives, his pale eyes deep-set under thick brows. He walked to the bench, picked up a pipe, set it down, peered into the glory-hole furnace, adjusted the flow of fuel — all his movements betraying anxious energy, barely under control.

Sadness stabbed through her. He had changed so much — even in his body. Before, he had been elegantly wiry; now his body was thickening with clone-doubled muscle. Daily he grew more heavy-shouldered, more powerful. His face had broadened, and knobs of new muscle writhed at the corners of his jaws.

He reached up, probed carefully at the back of his neck, and Cayten stiffened. "No," she said. "Please don't. That's not the thing to do, Genoaro."

He looked at her, expressionless, for a long moment. "How do you know?"

"Genoaro. . . ." Her voice trailed away under the flat stare he gave her.

He reached into a cupboard, took down a small platinum case. He opened it, removed a small ovoid of plastic and metal. He held it up between thumb and forefinger, showing it to her. "Why shouldn't I?"

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His eyes seemed to belong to an unpleasant stranger.

She looked away. "I don't think it's good for you. The Level."

"You're not my créchemother, Cayten." His voice, ordinarily so soft, grated. She winced.

"No, no, I'm not. But I do love you."

He was very still, as if caught on the sharp edge of a decision, balanced just for the moment. He moved suddenly, closing the cupboard and shutting down his furnaces. Then he reached back and snapped the personaskein into the receptacle at the base of his skull.

He changed, as the persona spread out into his cortex. His face hardened; his mouth stretched in a wide, humorless grin; his eyes took on a yellow opacity. He took a step toward her, an abrupt, alien movement. "I'm going up," he growled. He showed his teeth, his lips wrinkling back in a frightening inhuman gesture.

She stepped to block the door, and held up her hands pleadingly. "I know you're still there, Genoaro. I know you're not a real hyena. Thendard's told me how it is, so don't pretend you can't understand me."

He moved so quickly.

She was too surprised to dodge. He knocked her aside, and his sharp nails slashed open her cheek.

Then he was gone, and she had found herself sitting on the floor, bleeding.

CAYTEN WALKED along the wall where Thendard kept his memorabilia — the charming detritus of a long and experimental life. Thendard kept pace with her, riding his powerchair a step behind.

She paused before a cluster of wall-mounted holostills, which showed Thendard roaming the Level in his favored persona.

"You make a lovely elephant, Thendard." She peered at one window, in which a naked Thendard mounted another beaster, a gigantic woman wearing the swirling shoulder tattoos of a Retrantic enforcer. Cayten wondered if such sexual congress was even possible, considering the immensity of the participants. Perhaps Thendard had additional bodymods, she thought, peering closer; but the constricted angle from which she could view the image preserved his modesty. The two of them wore identical wish-you-were-here smiles. "How. . . ?"

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A good-natured leer earthquaked across Thendard's face. "I'd show you, but you're far too insubstantial, a wisp of a woman, a sprite."

She ignored him, and leaned over a case of antique skinmasks. Thendard had once been an actor, and his collection of theatrical artifacts was very fine. But she wasn't seeing the gleaming contours of the masks; she was seeing Genoaro, curved over the back of some thick-bodied hyena bitch, taut as a bowstring, snarling joyfully.

"Why," she asked, "couldn't Genoaro have chosen a persona like yours? Something strong and admirable, something I could understand. To want to be an elephant; *that* I could understand. Or a lion or a buffalo or even a wolf. All admirable creatures in their way."

Thendard floated in his chair, looking up at the holowindows. "They say our personas choose us, not the other way round."

"Oh, that's mystical shit, Thendard. Why, why would anyone want to be a hyena? Ugly, treacherous rot-eaters!" She shuddered and shut her eyes.

Thendard reached out and patted her shoulder with a hand the size of a pillow. "I have theories. Perhaps you don't want to hear them just now?"

"No. Tell me."

"Well. You've never felt the pull of the Level, so it's hard to explain. Here we all are, Old Earth so far away in time and space that many think it no more than a charming myth. Dilvermoon is full of humans, and Dilvermoon is not our native land, oh no. Small wonder that some of us try to follow our genes back into the beforetime, down the backbrain into the plains we rose from. The Level is a steel Serengeti. We try to find a link to ourselves there."

Cayten shrugged. "I've heard the rationale."

"Heard, yes. Understood? Cayten, you're an admirable person, but you navigate these new waters more easily than most of us; you're in control, and you like it. You don't seem to need reassurance as much as most of us do; or need to touch the ancestral dirt. Perhaps you're evolved — or perhaps you're just too tightly wrapped to see the fun in a little costumed frolicking."

"That's what you call the Beaster Level? 'Costumed frolicking'? Genoaro sharpens his teeth and goes looking for carrion in the tween corridors, and that's 'frolicking'?"

Thendard looked away. "Well, some go too far. Still, the hyena has an important place on the Level, as on the ancestral plain. It's the final

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priest: it culls the weak; it buries the dead. Genoaro has always had something of a preoccupation with mortality. You knew about that darkness in him. It's how he came to his work. The knives he makes are used for all sorts of ugly purposes: sacrifices, executions, ritual mutilations. He feels himself to be an instrument of death, and the hyena eased him, gave him acceptance. He's talked to me about it. He couldn't talk to you." Thendard's rumble had a reproachful overtone.

"He couldn't talk to me? Why not?"

"Cayten . . . you would never try the skein. You had no point of reference for such a discussion."

"I didn't need to try it, to see what it was doing to Genoaro. He spends most of his time on the Level, or brooding about it. He's behind in his work, and even when he's in his workshop, his work doesn't go well. Our lives are running down different paths now; I rarely see him, and we're supposed to be living together. We were lovers. . . ."

Her eyes filled again, but in sorrow, not rage.

A long, silent time passed, before she came to a decision. "Thendard, you have a very good medunit here, don't you? You must: you're too fat to live, otherwise. I want an implant."

His eyebrows rose. "A persona interface? Why?"

CAYTEN RUBBED at the base of her skull. There was no significant pain, only a bit of soreness around the implant site, a mild ache in the vertebrae — symptoms that Thendard assured her would disappear. The most disconcerting sensation was the simple strangeness of it, to reach up and touch a new part of herself, a plastic-and-metal surface where always before she had touched only soft skin and downy hair. The locking lugs on the mating surface of the interface were smooth and precise, the dataport textured with a hundred tiny fiber pins.

"It looks good on you, Cayten." Thendard attempted a lascivious wink, so absurdly exaggerated that Cayten laughed.

"Oh?"

"Oh yes! There's something about a woman with an implant. One can't help but wonder what her vices are; such speculation is titillating."

"I see. Well, now what?"

"I suppose you must choose a skein. I have a few female skeins,

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if that's the orientation you'd prefer."

She looked at him, and his broad face revealed a mild degree of embarrassment. "Well," he said. "It's occasionally instructive. But at any rate: a skein. May I recommend? You'd enjoy the gemsbok, I think — you're strong, graceful, beautiful. Don't you like to run? Or perhaps the otter. Such a quick, clever creature."

Annoyance flickered through her. "You'd prefer me to be a cud-chewer, so that I'd be captured by the first big red-eyed buck I ran into on the Level? Have a hot time? Or spend a nice relaxing day cracking open clams and playing chutes-and-ladders in a mud room?" The sharpness of her voice surprised her.

Thendard spread his hands defensively. "No offense meant."

She shook herself, and pulled her hand away from her neck. "I'm sorry. You've been nothing but kind, Thendard."

A silent minute passed.

"I want to be a hyena," she finally said.

In the dim red light of the Beaster Level, pleasure seekers pressed against them, a sea of wild eyes, wet mouths, sweat-slick bodies. They moved cautiously through the clamor and stink. The noise was louder and the smells more intense than anything she had ever experienced — the effect of the skein? Cayten stayed very close to the comforting bulk of Thendard, who now moved with a rolling, deliberate gait, swinging his head from side to side. Naked, he seemed even larger.

She found it difficult to analyze her own sensations. Was she different? She wore the skein at its least powerful setting, but her mind had become strange to her. Her thoughts ran in alien channels. She was afraid; she was eager. She felt ready to attack Genoaro if she found him; at the same time, she felt ready to flee, should he speak unkindly to her. She constantly repressed an urge to giggle, though she felt no amusement. She was in a curiously volatile state, unconnected to the self she knew — a feeling unlike any she had ever felt.

They paused at the radiant point of half a dozen corridors, where a large domed space provided room enough for the herds to congregate. Strips of pallid grass sprouted from deck boxes; succulent fungoid vines dropped from steel trellises.

In the half-light of the overhead lightstrips, the hall seethed. Beasters

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walked, staggered, crawled, swaggered, hopped, according to the persona-skein each had chosen. Every near-variant of humanity was represented. Pointed ears quivered; teeth glinted; fur grew luxuriantly in gardens of human flesh. Glittering skeins clung to the base of each skull. No other adornment was permitted on the Level, no garment that might conceal a weapon. In appearance the beasters ranged from the wholly human to those who had so modified their bodies that they seemed ugly caricatures of the creatures they pretended to be.

A small herd of wildebeests surrounded a clear space along the scarred metal of a bulkhead. A slender young woman leaned there, her pale body shivering in fear and anticipation. The bull, massive, shaggy, approached. Cayten felt no sexual intrigue; she did not find herself imagining what the woman might soon feel. Instead, a thread of hunger trickled through her mind. What, she wondered, would the woman's delicate flesh taste of? She shuddered.

Several of the bachelor bulls sensed Cayten's attention and whirled, snorting, to fix red truculent eyes on her. She drifted away.

She watched the passing faces with sidelong glances, fascinated by the animal lusts and fears and cravings, modeled so oddly in human bone and skin. That heavy-limbed, paunchy man, with the carefully coiffed mane of blue hair — what had moved him to abandon his executive desk for the uncertainties of the Beaster Level, to hunt with the dancing, weaving gait of a weasel? And what of his companion? She was skillfully painted with fashionable body toners, she wore her thick orange hair in a love knot, and her sharp little fingernails were buffed to crimson perfection. Cayten might have guessed her to be a confidential secretary or perhaps an expensive concubine. She also wore the weasel persona, and watched the other beasters with luminous eyes.

Many of the beasters had so modified their bodies that it was the remnant of humanity that seemed out of place. On the far side of the open space, Cayten observed a pack of wolfheads lounging against the bulkhead: a dozen or so men and women with wide yellow eyes, facial hair in grizzled tufts, and furry bodies as hard and narrow as slats.

One woman detached herself from the pack and came toward them. "Look," she said, baring hypertrophied canines. "A carrion dog. And a big bull." She laughed, and Cayten felt a flush of anger — too intense. She snarled, made a little darting movement toward the wolfhead, then veered

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back to Thendard's side. Her jaws ached to close on the wolfhead's throat, and it was so bizarre an emotion that she felt faint.

Thendard rumbled a warning at the wolfhead, who stepped back. Then she laughed again. "Will you breed with the elephant?"

"Pay no attention," Thendard told Cayten. "The wolves hold everyone in contempt; it's their nature. But they have no particular courage."

They moved on through the Level, and Thendard explained. "She wouldn't have dared to speak, had she been alone. The wolves need each other to feel real. Besides, there's no real antipathy between wolves and hyenas. They derive from completely different habitats. It's not like the leopards and the hyenas, who truly despise one another. Or the hyenas and lions, who've shared the same hunting grounds for eons. Should we meet a leopard — or worse, a pride of lions, stay very close to me, Cayten, even though there's probably no great danger. This is a safe sector, well-monitored. Only a mad person would seriously attempt to injure you here; the deckhead crawls with lawmechs."

Thendard pointed up, and Cayten saw a lawmech clinging to the rough steel of the ceiling like a black metal insect, its scanners rotating, its stunners deployed in all directions. "I see," she said. "But what if we can't find Genoaro in the safe sectors? What if he's in the tween corridors, or even the Dark Level?"

Thendard frowned. "No, he's not that far gone, Cayten. And if he were, all you could do would be to go home and change the locks. He wouldn't be Genoaro anymore. What you feel now is just a pale, clean shadow of what the creatures on the Dark feel. You're still a woman now, 95 percent human. You still think like a human being; your perceptions are only lightly filtered through the hyena persona. If we went a little way into the tween corridors and came across a corpse a couple days' ripe, you still wouldn't be able to ignore the maggots. You'd have to crank up the skein a good bit before you'd really enjoy a meal like that."

She felt an unpleasant disorientation when she realized she was not quite as repulsed by the idea of eating carrion as she had been after she had learned what Genoaro was doing. "Thendard," she said in a weak voice. "Shut up, please. Help me look, but shut up."

He nodded, and groped for the skein at the back of his neck. Cayten marveled that he could reach it at all, considering his bulk, but he did, and made an adjustment.

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Instantly his affect changed visibly to a more intense mode, and his features became unfamiliar. His eyes filmed over, as though inward thoughts preoccupied him, and his vast body slouched into an even more slope-shouldered arm-swinging stance.

They moved deeper into the Level, into areas where the lights were dimmer and the lawmechs fewer, closer to the tween corridors. Here the beasters lived in greater earnest. The tall, graceful antelope; the tiny, delicate gazelles; the truculent Cape buffalo — showed white rolling eyes to them, as the men and women of the herd played the game with fearful abandon. Apparently, the sight of an elephant bull and a hyena bitch traveling together was odd enough to frighten the more timid of the beasts. Often when the two of them emerged into a nexus, the herds would scent them and bolt for the exits, abandoning the plots of force-grown grass they had been feeding on.

"How do they know?" she whispered to Thendard, in a suddenly empty nexus. "Why do they fear me? I don't look like a hyena."

"The skein. It transmits an ID signature." Thendard's voice was not his own; it had become a trembling rumble. "Every other skein picks up the signal and tags the wearer's perceptual process with the correct cast. Haven't you noticed? How you don't have any trouble knowing the part each beaster plays?"

She heard a stealthy creak. In the far corner of the nexus was a tangle of rusting girders, like a patch of tall, angular brush. She caught a swift movement, and picked out the shape of a small, lithe man stretched out along a crossbar. His skin was tattooed in jagged splotches; his golden eyes watched her, unblinking. After a moment he opened a mouth full of needle-sharp teeth and hissed at her. *A leopard,* she thought, and understood Thendard's explanation. An air of *leopardness* hovered about the watching man, as if he cast a double shadow: one manlike, one less substantial — the long, dangerous shape of a big cat.

"The intensity depends on the setting of his skein, and yours," Thendard said. "If he were cranked all the way down into his hindbrain, you wouldn't be able to see a man at all. And he'd try to kill you, if he could cut you away from me. Leopards hate hyenas — hyenas will eat any leopard they catch in the open. Leopards won't eat hyenas, unless they're starving, but they like to kill them when they can surprise one alone, then hang the carcass in a tree as a trophy. It's a bone-deep hate, much deeper than, say,

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the mutual contempt that hyenas and lions have for each other."

They passed into a darker corridor. Thendard threw up his head and snorted. "We've found a pack, though I can't say if it's Genoaro's." His little eyes gleamed, and he shuffled forward at a ponderous gallop.

She followed, and now her body and its movements seemed to grow stranger. She found herself running beside Thendard, using a bouncing, light-footed shamble that was both utterly alien and undeniably comfortable.

She laughed. A mindless titter came out of her mouth and frightened her into silence. She sniffed at the air, and she smelled that scent that she had in late months come to associate with Genoaro: a smell of old blood and death and unwashed bodies.

THENDARD STOPPED at the end of the corridor. A hot light came from the nexus beyond. Cayten peered around Thendard's bulk.

The nexus was very large, a hundred meters across, and lit by blinding mercury arcs. At the far side, a metallic clatter attended the opening of a heavy door. From the dark opening, a four-footed creature bounded, some sort of antelope with a striped brown hide and short, twisted horns. It stood blinking for a moment, then leaped away, pursued by a pack of beasters that rose abruptly from concealment.

"Hyenas," Thendard whispered.

The beasters ran after the animal, yipping, giggling, and Cayten could hear the clash of snapping jaws, echoing across the nexus. The animal's eyes rolled desperately, but it appeared slowed by some injury or weakness. It stayed just ahead of the pack, eluding them with sudden cuts and frantic leaps.

The hyenas were closer now, and Cayten recognized Genoaro at the back of the pack. He ran with his head thrown back, eyes fiery, mouth stretched wide open, as if he were swallowing the moment. She felt a deep revulsion; at the same instant, she longed to join him. The futile dodging of the animal suddenly seemed less pitiable and more exciting.

"It's not a real animal," Thendard said. "It's a thinframe robot hung with vatmeat. But it's a good simulation. See. It doesn't really try to escape, just tries to make a good chase of it. The Level management provides them, for a fee."

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She wished Thendard would shut up. The end of the hunt was near; the animal moved on shaky legs, and its sides heaved. Finally it turned, at bay in an angle of the nexus.

A muscular, swag-bellied woman darted in, teeth snapping. The animal twisted to meet the attack, and a second bulky woman rushed in, bit into the animal's ham. It tried to shake her off, but she clung, jaws working. Blood sprayed her face, then the animal's hindquarters collapsed. Two more pack members dove in and seized the animal's throat.

It was over, and the pack fought over the corpse, whooping and elbowing. Genoaro seemed to hang back, along with several of the smaller men. Avidity and uncertainty warred in Genoaro's face.

Cayten felt the call of the animal's flesh, longed to taste the blood. Some part of her was horrified, but she pushed past Thendard's arm, out into the bright light of the nexus.

"Genoaro," she called, approaching the kill.

A dozen bloody faces lifted up from the animal's open belly, and lips writhed back from white teeth.

"What do you want?" The big woman's voice was an unsteady warble. She giggled, but the sound held more menace than humor. Cayten saw that she affected a blind eye, a disk that shone dead white in the pink blaze of the lights. The woman's lower jaw was huge; she looked as if she could easily break bones between those teeth.

Cayten recognized her, quite suddenly. She was Shinvel Dward, an influential critic of Bo'eme, specializing in domestic art forms. She had publicly praised Cayten's work on several occasions, and come to Cayten's last opening, dressed modishly and escorted by two beautiful young bond servants. Cayten tried to connect that memory to the naked beaster who now glared at her, and grew dizzy. Dward's stance seemed terribly threatening; Cayten had an urge to fawn, as though the woman were her superior in some clear but unidentifiable way. She bowed her head.

Dward snorted. "Join us," she finally said. "But wait your turn."

The beasters returned to their feast, ignoring Cayten.

Genoaro watched Cayten with eyes that seemed to contain no humanity at all. "What did you expect to find here?" he asked finally.

She had no answer. The feeding beasters slowed, the first edge of appetite blunted, and Genoaro sank to his knees by the corpse, and began to tear at it with his teeth.

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Cayten observed him dispassionately, as though she watched from a dream. She compared this scarlet-faced creature with the man whose hands had once touched her so sweetly, so intimately. The influence of the skein faded in her mind, until it no longer seemed important. She reached behind her neck and switched off the skein, and found herself on a bloody steel killing ground, in the company of human horrors. She turned away, abruptly sick.

Thendard guided her from the nexus, before he reactivated her skein, at minimal function. "I thought I warned you," he said. "Never switch out while you're still on the Level; it takes time to come up from the hindbrain. You want to do that when you're back in Bo'eme. Decompress slowly. Besides, the lawmechs will stun you if they don't pick up a skein signature from you. Got to run the skein when you're on the Level. The beasters despise tourists; even the beaster tourists feel that way."

"Take me home," she muttered.

Genoaro was gone for two days, and when he came home, he stank of death and sex. She could not speak to him, nor would he look at her. She went to her own studio and immersed herself in her work and did not see him for another day.

She was working on a tall, graceful goblet, glazing the spidery porcelain armature with tiny flecks of corundum. The goblet depicted a pastoral scene, ruby horses running on a field of aquamarine under sapphire skies. She lifted each bit of gemstone into place with a fine-tipped brush, fused it to the porcelain with a needle of coherent light. The process demanded so much concentration that she didn't notice Genoaro until he spoke.

"Beautiful," he said.

She turned to look at him. His face was still drawn with fatigue, and taut with some deeper strain. A muscle jumped under his left cheekbone. But his eyes seemed to belong to him again, as though the Genoaro she knew had returned.

He stood at her door, leaning against the frame, his hands thrust deep in his pockets. "I'm sorry," he said.

She believed him, with a sudden rush of relief. She laid aside her brush and laser; then she went to him.

He held her so tight that her ribs creaked and she could not breathe. She held still for a long moment, but then fear licked at her, just a little,

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and she pushed at him. He didn't seem to notice at first, but then he released her and stepped back.

"I'm sorry," he said again, and his face was so full of confusion and pain that she put her arms around him and held him as hard as she could.

Genoaro's furnaces were cold, and for several days he did not light them. He moved about the studio like a ghost, face gray, body slumped into a defeated shape. Cayten had no words of comfort to give him. When she tried to speak of pleasantly trivial things, he listened with a look of grim patience.

On the third day, she found him by his furnaces, warming a pot of cloudy green soda glass. His face was sharp with intent.

"You're going back to work?" She felt a warm rush of relief.

He smiled tautly. "Well, I'll try."

A week passed, and another. Genoaro worked with a strangely fierce concentration, as if he were determined to build from his labors a refuge of some sort. He seemed to be willing himself into thoughtless exhaustion. At first Cayten welcomed his absorption as a sign of returning normality, but after a while she found it increasingly disturbing.

He was always in his studio, not even pausing to take meals with her. His face grew more drawn with each day that passed, until he wore a look of constant haggard desperation.

When she asked him what was wrong, he shook his head and said, "I've gotten behind, Cayten. I'll have to work very hard for a while, or I'll lose too many clients."

"Genoaro . . . they'll make allowances."

He darted a hot glance at her. "I don't want anyone to make allowances."

She couldn't understand his anger.

She never found a way to discuss the Level with him, though she tried more than once. Each time she mentioned the Level to Genoaro, he turned the subject away, as if it were a dagger she had thrust at him. Finally he shouted at her. "That's over, Cayten! You do me no good bringing it up, making me think about it. You can help me most if you never mention the Level again."

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"I won't, then," she said, though she wondered if it was the right thing to do.

One day soon after, a Linean came to their door to fetch a work it had commissioned.

The alien, a rotund blue batrachian creature, lifted the brown glass poniard from its velvet-lined presentation case. "Fine work," it grunted, as it turned the edge so that the blade threw a delicate glitter into Cayten's eyes.

"Thank you," Genoaro said stiffly, waiting impatiently for the Linean to finish its examination.

Acting on a sudden impulse, Cayten spoke. "Kingly one," she said — that being the proper term of respect for a Linean of elevated rank. "May I ask for whom the poniard is intended?"

Genoaro glared at her, shaking his head. But the Linean responded courteously. "One of our elder diplomats soon will retire."

She ignored Genoaro's obvious displeasure, and spoke again. "A lovely gift to commemorate your honored person's service, then."

The Linean shook its greasy blue head. "No gift. With this will we cut the honored person's aged throat, it being essential to demonstrate the proper respect."

She drew back, still smiling, though she was sure her smile had gone as glassy as the poniard.

When the Linean was gone, Genoaro looked at her wordlessly.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"It doesn't matter," he said, turning away. "You know what sort of work I do."

"You aren't responsible for the use your clients make of your work."

"No, of course not," he answered in a muffled voice. "But I like the work, you see. I like to make sharp things; I like to make things that love blood. I won't ever find another line of work I like as well."

"But. . . ."

"No, I won't find a new job. I might as well cut out the middleman. Don't you think?"

In the morning he was gone again.

Two days after Genoaro left, she went to see Shinvel Dward.

She announced herself at the door to Dward's apartment, and a long

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time passed before the door slid up and a pretty bond servant motioned for her to enter.

Dward lounged on a curved divan, her muscular bulk swathed in magenta spidersilk. "Cayten Borlavinda. An interesting and delightful surprise. How may I help you?"

"Citizen Dward. . . ," Cayten began.

Dward made an impatient gesture. "Please call me Shinvel. Let's not stand on ceremony; sit here beside me."

Cayten sat in the corner of the divan. Dward rolled to her belly, struck a grotesquely adolescent pose, chin in hand, bare feet waving in the air. "Tell me," she said in a chummy voice.

"Well . . . Shinvel. It's about Genoaro."

Dward raised her heavy eyebrows. "Who?"

"Genoaro Maryal. He runs with your pack. My lover."

Dward's broad face shifted through a quick cycle of emotion: recognition, disdain, withdrawal. "Your lover? I know him only vaguely. You're a novice on the Level; I can tell. Otherwise you'd know there is no 'pack.' Hyenas aren't true pack animals. They come together to hunt, but the alliance is loose and soon dissolved. Never love a hyena, dear; they're inconstant." Dward put a large hand on Cayten's thigh, smoothed a tiny wrinkle from the fabric of Cayten's bodysuit.

Cayten repressed a shudder, but Dward noticed and jerked her hand away. The big woman sat up abruptly, face hardening. "You're wasting your time," Dward said. "That one's lost." She snorted dismissively, and gestured for a bond servant. A wispy girl with short lavender hair and a silver-striped face ran forward, bearing a tray.

Dward took up a long-stemmed pipe, filled it with some pale green herb from a cloisonné humidor, lit it. She took a deep pull and offered the pipe to Cayten, who shook her head.

"What do you mean, he's 'lost'?" Cayten asked.

Dward released the fragrant cloud. "I mean, you don't want him anymore. He's past the edge. If he isn't in the Dark already, he soon will be. Change your locks and forget him."

Thendard had said much the same thing once, she remembered. This time she didn't attempt to hide the shudder. She dropped her face into her hands.

"Oh, for. . . ." Dward was exasperated. "He was a weak man, and now

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He belongs to the Dark now, not to you. Not even to himself.

he's not even that much. People like that have no business on the Level. They can't separate their pleasures from their responsibilities, and so they end up in the Dark. Look at me; I go up to the Level to play. It means more than that to your lover. A lot more; too much."

Cayten lifted her head. "He was a good man. Is a good man!"

Dward laughed and drew deeply on her pipe. "'Good' has nothing to do with it, Cayten. I'm not 'good,' but I can run the Level and take my pleasures there and come back to Bo'eme and do my work. I'll keep on doing that as long as it pleases me. Genoaro is different. He may have been a 'good' man once, but the Dark calls him too strongly. He belongs to the Dark now, not to you. Not even to himself."

Cayten shook her head, blinked back tears. "No. He loves me. I can bring him back."

The drug smoothed some of the scorn from Dward's face, but there was no sympathy there. "You're a good little artist," Dward said, her voice slurring slightly. "And you have pretty little breasts, which I'd like to touch. But you have no grasp of Genoaro's situation. The Dark has him now, and the Dark is a more satisfying lover than any human could be. For Genoaro."

As Cayten left, Dward laughed again.

She went up to the Level alone, too frantic to ask Thendard for his company and his help. She moved through the herds and brushed against the other predators, her skein idling.

She drifted toward the tween corridors, where the law still held, but where violence was a stronger possibility. Refugees from the Holding Arks squatted in these corridors, their skeinless presence tolerated. Though they lived unprotected by the laws that guarded the citizens of Dilvermoon, they were safer than in the jungle of the Dark. They survived any way they could, selling their bodies and their services, hoping to sell their contracts before chance or the whim of a citizen terminated their hopes.

The smells intensified, and the noises became more secretive, as she

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approached the tween corridors. Cayten saw no refugees; apparently they could hide quite successfully from a beaster operating at her minimal level. The light dropped off, until the corridors became shadowy places where silent forms moved.

She wandered for hours through that dim maze. Occasionally a pack of beasters would run past her, rolling crazy eyes at her. But apparently her possession of a skein marked her as a citizen, and none molested her, though many flung crude remarks at her in passing. All these she ignored. She began to think that Thendard was too cautious.

Finally she passed into a nexus that lay on the border between the tween corridors and the Dark. On the Dark side of the nexus, the deckhead had collapsed into a tangle of corroding conduit and cable.

She was at first not certain how she could be so sure that she had reached the border. But she was. The junk that blocked the far side of the nexus shouted danger to her; each shadow seemed to conceal a leopard; lions might skulk beneath the rusty canopy; crocodiles might burst from the puddles of seepage and oil that glimmered here and there. After a bit she understood that her skein was signaling a warning, using the appropriate imagery.

Several openings led into the Dark, illuminated only by the faint glow of emergency lightstrips. Cayten studied these openings with a sort of morbid fascination. Was Genoaro inside somewhere, doing hideous things, or, perhaps, the victim of some dire act?

The nexus was silent and empty; her steps echoed as she approached the center of the open space. A faint breeze blew from the Dark, and carried an unfamiliar scent. She could see a little way into the Dark, through the aisles cleared through the debris, but nothing moved. The Dark might be a steel jungle, but for the moment it seemed as uninhabited as any desert.

She turned away, back into the tween corridors. She was growing desperate; she might search for Genoaro for weeks without success, and surely he would be dead or irretrievably devolved long before that. Her unaugmented human senses were too dull.

She paused at the edge of the nexus, and her fingers touched the hard shell of the personaskein at the back of her neck. She toyed with it for a moment, then disengaged the interlock and cranked up the vernier, higher than she had set it before — though well below maximum intensity.

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The world turned, and became a far more interesting place. She felt light, powerful, unnaturally alert. The scent that blew from the Dark resolved into a complex of distinct odors, each sharp and well-defined. There was the enticing sweetness of decaying protein, the harshness of corroding metal, the chemical tang of a thousand varieties of plastic. There were the scent-signatures of half a dozen predators who claimed territories in the near Dark. She turned away, a shudder twitching her hide, and ran into the tween corridors, head up, sniffing for Genoaro's scent.

The tween corridors seemed changed, dense with striving life, full of sounds and scents that she had not noticed before. She ran with an easy lolloping gait, tossing her head, occasionally voicing a high-pitched giggle, a sound that now seemed perfectly natural.

At the next corridor nexus, she surprised a group of wildebeests gathered around an algae-covered sump. They were, Cayten thought with the part of her mind that remained hers, a remarkably homely group of people with long, pendulous noses and awkward, rawboned bodies. They snorted, showed white eyes, but, evidently perceiving no threat in a solitary hyena, held their ground. She charged playfully around their flank, and they whirled to keep her in sight. Several children pressed back into the center of the herd, and Cayten was transiently horrified to find herself wondering if they could be separated from their parents.

She turned aside and raced off into the nearest corridor, choosing a direction at random, and a moment later she had forgotten her revulsion.

Genoaro's scent, along with the associated scents of other excited hyenas, came to her a few minutes later, as she passed through a maze of low-ceilinged access tunnels. She stopped, filled her nostrils with him, savoring the mingled odors of his sweat, the metallic burnt-clay reek of his glass furnace — a scent that still clung to him — and the coppery tang of fresh blood.

She pounded after him, smiling, feeling an unambiguous pleasure at the thought of seeing him. She burst from the access tunnels into a long, empty warehouse bay, and heard the yelping of a pack. The last hyena disappeared into a corridor on the far side of the bay, and she increased her speed, ignoring the pain that began to stitch her side. She could feel her face stretching in a wild fixed grin, and she barked with anticipation.

She caught up with the pack at the exit of the corridor into another large bay. She recognized Genoaro, running at the front of the pack, legs

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pumping easily, body hunched forward in yearning. Then she saw what the pack was running.

Half a dozen preadolescent children raced desperately for the next tunnel. They wore the gray rags of Holding Ark refugees, and their thin legs flashed in the blue light. They wasted no energy on cries for help.

A brief keen delight lifted her forward, shouldering the other hyenas aside. She caught up with Genoaro and laughed. He glanced over, recognized her, and dodged aside in startlement. He slowed, his face filling with confusion. Then he took her arm and jerked her to a stop.

She tried to twist free, but his fingers tightened painfully.

"What are you doing, Cayten?" he asked, in a voice she did not recognize.

"Hunting," she said, and giggled. Her feet still wanted to run, and she danced up and down in place.

He groaned and reached up to his skein. Watching his face, she thought: *A light just went out behind his face.*

He shook her. "Crank down, Cayten. Come on."

The pack disappeared into the far corridor, and she felt a sudden heaviness in her heart.

"Yes, all right." She twisted the vernier, and a large part of the world died away softly.

She became aware of what she had been doing, in stages, as though a holoprojectionist with an unsteady hand had taken control of her mind's eye. The Dark and its deadly scents. The tween corridors and their shifting currents of life. Her hunt for Genoaro. The Ark children, fleeing from her teeth, from her hunger.

"Oh," she gasped. "Oh."

"You don't understand," Genoaro said.

Her revulsion, which had first centered on herself, widened to include him, and she did pull away finally, and took several involuntary steps back.

"What . . . what were you *doing*?" She could barely stand to look at him, but then details sank in. His hair stood up in greasy tufts; his face was dark with week-old beard. His whiskery mouth was stained with some clotted black material.

Genoaro shook his head dumbly, watching her with dull eyes.

"What were you doing?" she shouted, and sprang at him, fists balled.

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He made no move to defend himself when she thumped his chest. He said nothing until she grew tired and let her hands drop to her sides.

"Really, Cayten, you're wrong," he said, in a barely audible whisper. "It's just sport; we wouldn't have hurt them. When we catch them, we give them money and let them go. Who does it hurt? It's nothing, compared to the other things they're willing to do for money, things they do all the time."

She covered her face, and concentrated on controlling her breathing. The skein idled in her backbrain, but she was barely aware of its influence. When she thought she could speak with some semblance of calm, she looked at him. "Will you take me home?"

He looked at the corridor into which the pack had run, then shrugged. "Yes, of course, Cayten."

They were almost out of the tween corridors, when she smelled fresh death. Even though her skein was only idling, she still felt drawn to investigate the off-corridor maintenance shaft from which the smell came. She started toward the shaft, impelled by her skein, and then thought, *What's wrong with me?*

"No," Genoaro said, just as she decided not to look. His voice changed her mind.

"No?" She studied his face. He was almost a stranger, but not quite. Something under that sheath of twitching muscle still showed the presence of Genoaro Maryal, but he was looking for a place to hide.

She ducked through the oval pressure hatchway, into the shaft. In the dim red glow of the safety light lay a small, ravaged corpse, eviscerated and partially dismembered. Thin ribs thrust whitely from what was left of the torso, and the floor was slick with blood and other fluids.

When she backed out, gagging, Genoaro was gone.

GENOARO DIDN'T come home. Cayten roamed her studio silently, doing no work, feeling a revulsion for herself, and for Genoaro, so powerful that it seemed to produce an odd species of numbness. She could feel an agony trying to be born, but it was as if her mind were refusing to process the thing she had learned about Genoaro, as if it were fighting the onset of some storm that would forever alter the shoreline between her and Genoaro.

She found herself, perversely, thinking of the many tender things that

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Genoaro had done for her in the sixteen years she had known him.

So much evidence contradicted the new knowledge she had gained of him in the tween corridors. She paused beside the glass-fronted case in which she kept those things she had made that were too precious to sell. On the bottom shelf was a small begging bowl she had made when she was still learning her craft, before her skills had brought her the critical and financial success she now enjoyed. The bowl was built on an armature of clone-grown walrus ivory, a net of warm, pale yellow, polished to a glassy smoothness. Genoaro, at the time still an unknown himself, still working in relative poverty, had given her the planet-born gems from which she had cut the major parts of the design. Viewed from the top, the bowl displayed a man and woman carved from lambent blue-white moonstone, languorously entwined on a shimmering coverlet of black opal.

The two of them.... The piece had marked the beginning of her rise to prominence. He had bought her the gemstone slabs, a gift he could not afford, as an expression of his faith in her talent.

She opened the case and took out the bowl. The ivory warmed her fingers, but the opal sucked away the heat. She traced the moonstone figures with her fingertip, concentrating on the silky texture.

Her hands suddenly shook with an impulse to smash the bowl against the wall. Instead, she returned it to the case, very carefully, so carefully.

She went to Thendard that night.

She told him everything, all the terrible details.

When she was done, he shook his great head, slowly, his jowls quivering. "Cayten, Cayten. I hardly know what to say. I suppose I didn't know Genoara as well as I once thought I did."

She looked at her hands, which twisted together in her lap like two creatures with a separate life. "Nor did I. But I still love him, Thendard, though I hate myself for it."

"There's no shame in loving the dead, Cayten. But you have to live for the living."

She looked up, her eyes full of hot tears. "But he's not dead. He's not. There must be something I can do."

Thendard rose from his powerchair and paced heavily back and forth. "I don't think so. What? Cayten, please, it'll be easiest if you think of him as dead. They don't come home from the Dark."

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"You don't know he's gone to the Dark?"

"No.... But it's what I prefer to believe. If he hasn't gone into the Dark, then he's a purposeful monster, like the others who hunt the tween corridors for helpless victims. I prefer to think that he can't help himself. I loved him, too, Cayten. He *was* a good man, a good friend, full of humanity. Some beasters gain in humanity, on the Level. Some lose, and there's no way to tell in advance which way it will go."

"Why do you do it, then?" She watched him with narrowed eyes, holding in a sudden rush of anger. Thendard had proved stronger than Genoaro; she could not contain her resentment.

"Adventure? Renewal? All the standard rationales for which you have no patience...."

A silence grew between them.

"What will you do?" Thendard finally asked.

"I'll take him home, if I can find him. Is it any different from ganglusar dust, or wireheading, or any of the other ways people can lose themselves?" she asked.

"No," Thendard said, and nothing more. His deep-set eyes were dark with premonition.

"Help me again," she asked. "I can't be a hyena bitch anymore. Help me build a new body — I'll look for him as a lioness, if you'll help me."

Thendard pursed his lips. "Lions despise hyenas," he said. "They're too much alike — except that the lions are stronger."

"I know," she said.

She submitted herself to Thendard's medunit, and, over the course of a month, it carved her into a new being. The process was sometimes painful; but the pain the medunit's drugs could not wash away, she endured without complaint. A deeper source of pain was Genoaro's continued absence.

The medunit reinforced her bones, built new tendons, installed fifty kilos of clone-doubled muscle. It paid particular attention to her hands, enlarging and knitting them into massive clubs of bone and sinew.

She could flex her hands only with difficulty. Her nails had become needle-sharp hooks, gleaming scimitars. Fangs touched the flesh on either side of her mouth, cold and hard.

Thendard watched as she stood naked before a mirror, admiring her new shape, flexing the ropy ridges of muscle that had altered the shape

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of her body into something only marginally human in appearance. "You look dangerous," he said mildly.

"I don't feel that way."

"You will in a bit," he said, and handed her a new skein.

Thendard was right. She ran the Level every night for a week, growing more comfortable with her new persona, nudging the vernier a little higher each night. She evaded the attentions of the dominant lions she met, who were eager to recruit her into their prides. She ignored the frantic sexual posturing of nomad lions. She saw hyenas, which bounded away when they became aware of her watchfulness, but she found no sign of Genoaro.

She felt herself growing into her new persona, though once or twice she wondered if she was instead shrinking into a smaller mindshape. These thoughts she immediately dismissed. The lioness skein gave her a seductive pleasure; it grew more irresistible each time she took it. She began to understand the pit that had opened under Genoaro's feet. The delight she felt was primarily centered in her heightened senses, and in the novelty of her new viewpoint; everything — scents, sights, sounds, tactile sensations — took on a more immediate, vital presence. She was always careful to feed well before she went up to the Level, so she could pad through the herds with no more than a intellectual appetite. She only rarely thought of making a kill, and then it was no more than a passing impulse, easily quelled.

She talked to Thendard about it, but he dismissed her notion that the lion was a nobler creature than the hyena.

"Lions are lazy creatures, Cayten," he told her. "There's no lion so content as a zoo lion — one who has nothing to do but eat and sleep and fuck."

When he said this, she experienced a poignant animosity, just for an instant. She felt her lips writhe back.

He looked away quickly, as if he did not wish to see what was in her face.

"I'm sorry, Thendard." She took a deep breath. "I don't know what got into me."

He looked at her and smiled. "*I* know." He reached out and took her hand — her *paw* — and smoothed his great hand over it gently. "You

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should be careful, Cayten. I never thought to see you so caught up in this. What of your life? Your work?"

"My life . . . is stopped. Until I can find Genoaro and bring him home."

"Cayten, Cayten. . . . You'll never bring him home, though it saddens me to say this to you. Give it up."

"No!"

She went away, back to the Level, where she roamed for a day and a night among the beasters, hunting Genoaro.

She failed to find any trace of him, but at the end, when she was exhausted and surly with hunger, she found Shinvel Dward and two of the critic's bond servants.

She trapped the three of them in a dead-end tween corridor. Dward glared without recognition as Cayten moved closer. The two bond servants — delicate, pale girls with elaborately braided red hair — darted back and forth aimlessly, making little shrieks of alarm.

Dward stood her ground, clashing her jaws in warning. "I'm a citizen of Dilvermoon, catbitch. Harm me, and you'll deal with the lawmechs!"

Cayten glanced up at the deckhead, which was empty. "I see no lawmechs."

Dward paled slightly. "I'm strong; you won't have an easy time of it."

Cayten growled and showed her fangs.

Dward fell back a step, and now there was terror on her lumpy face.

Cayten shook herself, and turned down the intensity of the skein. She felt a weight of outrage slip away — a surprisingly heavy weight. Abruptly the world seemed a cool and precise place, much reduced in contrast. She took a deep breath and straightened from the tense crouch she found herself in. "Don't you remember me, Shinvel? Me and my pretty little breasts. They at least are the same."

Dward's mouth fell open. "Cayten Borlavinda? Is that you? What have you done?"

"Adapted."

Dward's face displayed amazement, then resentment — finally rage. "What do you mean, frightening me that way? I should teach you a lesson!"

To her surprise, Cayten felt a growl rising from her chest, and she took an involuntary step toward Dward. "You'll teach me no lessons tonight, Shinvel. Don't provoke me. Tell me where Genoaro is, if you want to leave the tween corridors undamaged."

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Dward stood frozen for a moment, then relaxed by slow degrees, smiling crookedly. "Still chasing that worthless dog? I can tell you where to look, but I don't think you'll find him."

"Where?"

Dward laughed a humorless hyena laugh. "He's gone into the Dark, of course. None of us have seen him on the Legal Level for over a month."

Cayten's mind clicked into belief, and she turned away.

Dward called after her. "You've made a bad enemy today, cutie. See if I don't ruin you in Bo'eme; see if I don't."

The words made no impression on her.

She was afraid to go into the Dark. Thendard had told her terrible stories about acts of depravity too imaginative to have ever been conceived by real animals. "The Dark isn't a clean place, Cayten," he had said.

Now he warned her again. "No one who values their humanity goes into the Dark. The Dilvermoon authorities tolerate the Dark only because it drains off the violently insane and their natural victims. The Dark saves the lawmechs the trouble of catching and protecting."

"How could it be much worse than the tween corridors?"

Thendard shook his head, solemnly exasperated. "Do you never listen to me, Cayten? Well, listen now. The Dark is different. In the Dark, your skein knows only one setting: maximum intensity. Doesn't matter what you set it to; you're banged down into your hindbrain, all the way. Non-beasters can't even survive in the Dark. The datafield there stops your heart if you're not wearing a full-spec skein. . . ."

"I've been running the skein pretty deep, Thendard. I could handle it."

He snorted. "Sure."

"Well, why not?"

He shifted uneasily in his powerchair, and didn't speak for a long moment. "Oh, maybe you could handle it. It depends on something I can't measure. Some of us are more human than others, and those who are most human can run the Dark and come back. They have a little reserve; they can still think like a human being."

She thought about it. "Have you been in the Dark, Thendard?"

His face changed subtly; his attention seemed to turn inward. She could see memories playing behind his eyes, as though tiny holotanks flickered and danced there. "One time," he said. "Long ago."

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She waited for him to elaborate, as he always did, but for once no words welled from his mouth. Watching him, she was startled to see something unfamiliar in his face. *Thendard's old,* she thought. Why had she never noticed before?

Finally she said, "I'm going, Thendard. Will you come with me?"

He smiled a weary smile. "Can I change your mind?"

"No."

He shrugged and turned away, so that she could not see his eyes. After a long silence, which she could not bring herself to break, he sighed. "I'll go with you, Cayten, if you won't see sense. Why not?"

THENDARD INSISTED on certain preparations. "It's very different in the Dark, Cayten. You're a civilized woman. You'd eat off the floor in any legal corridor in Dilvermoon if you had to, and feel no fear of infection. Do that in the Dark, and you might have half a dozen parasites eating you from the inside out."

So she submitted to immunizations, to an implant of general-purpose nanovores, to an on-need endorphin synthesizer.

Thendard was pleased by her cooperation. "It's good of you to humor me. I'll feel much better about our expedition, especially if. . . ." His voice trailed off.

"If what, Thendard?"

"If you don't come back, dear." The laugh lines around his eyes crinkled into sadness. "At least now you'll have an edge over the other Darkrunners. If you don't come back — and I do — I'll want to think of you as living a different life. Happy again. A long, healthy life. I wouldn't want to live in the Dark myself, but it's better to live in the Dark than to die there. No?"

Thendard and Cayten passed rapidly through the tween corridors, until they stood in a long, narrow hall, from which multiple doorways led into the Dark.

"This is the safest ingress I know of," Thendard said. "These tunnels let into a maze complex. The predators who wait for new — and unwary —prey . . . they prefer other, less complicated lurks."

Cayten shivered. The doorways seemed hot with some unseen light, a black bloody radiance. She fixed her mind on Genoara, calling up sweet

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memories to push away the fear. She remembered his face, smiling. His voice, before it harshened. The touch of his hands on her body, before his hands grew too strong to be gentle.

Thendard looked at her, shaking his great head. "You can change your mind, Cayten. No shame in finding a bit of sense, even at this late date."

She shook her head. She tried to smile, and patted Thendard's arm. "I'm a constant sort of fool, Thendard."

He smiled back, but there was a resignation in his eyes that she found more unsettling than the doorways.

"All right, then. Crank down your skein, dear — you'll suffer less disorientation when we come out. About 70 percent of max; that'll be about right." Thendard adjusted his own skein. He seemed to melt into a new form, one with eroded gray skin and tiny, knowing eyes.

Cayten was sure he was cranked down more than 70 percent, but she was not so daring.

She took a deep breath, and tried to look on the shape of her own mind, to preserve it in perfect memory. It was a strange effort; it made her feel suddenly adrift on a sea more mysterious than she had ever guessed existed. She shook her head. *Useless.* "Here goes."

When her hand dropped away, she was deeper into her hindbrain than she had ever gone. Her mind contained nothing but purpose. She trotted toward the nearest tunnel, which no longer seemed so threatening. Instead, it called to her irresistibly; it sang to her of freedom from human concerns. She felt Thendard at her heels, however, and she could still take comfort from his huge, friendly presence.

That was the last wholly human thought she had before she passed into the Dark.

The lioness ran along the corridor, under the dim red lights, living the Serengeti that was not there. The unnatural tang of corroding metal stifled her. Ozone tingled her nose, and none of the smells was quite right. But some sort of prey were here, she knew, and even though she was not hungry, she took comfort and reassurance from that.

An old bull elephant staggered along at her heels, and she darted aside, wary of his huge feet. But then she remembered dimly that he was some sort of ally, as unlikely as that seemed. As she resumed her hunt, a picture formed in her mind's eyes: a human, a man with a long, narrow face and

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gentle eyes, whom she hated and desired. The memory was associated with a scent tag, the sly carrion stink of hyenas, which she despised. She snarled and ran faster, so that the elephant began to fall behind. The bull called to her, making meaningless sounds; she ignored him. His thin trumpeting took on an edge of desperation.

By the time she reached the first big nexus, she could barely hear him, and the thud of his feet against the steel had slowed. She put him from her mind, and concentrated on that face, the one that filled her with so many conflicting emotions. Was she hunting the thin-faced man? She could not decide. She lay down in the deep shadow beneath a dead cargo ramp, twitching with indecision and frustration.

At the exact moment when the old elephant emerged behind her, puffing and clutching at his chest, hunting dogs burst from a nearby tunnel.

The hunting dogs were smaller, more agile, and better-organized cousins of the hyenas. Even the lions feared them, when the dogs hunted in large numbers. This was a small pack, half a dozen scrawny creatures. Their ribs stood out, their skins were patchy with disease, and the alpha dog limped. The lioness relaxed. If they attacked her, she would kill as many of them as pleased her. For the moment she would do nothing; the ventilators blew their scent toward her, and they were unaware of her presence.

They saw the old elephant and barked with excitement. When they saw that he was alone, they raced across the nexus toward him, baying and snapping, bouncing with excitement.

In ordinary circumstances, in a herd of his own kind, the old elephant would have been safe. But he *was* alone, he was old, and he wasn't as big as a real elephant — nor were the dogs as small as real dogs. Some stripped-down version of these realities passed through the consciousness of the lioness, and she saw that the old elephant would die. If she waited a bit, she could cuff the dogs away from the carcass and dine at leisure.

As she processed this thought, an uneasiness came over the lioness, and her mind filled with the buzzing of competing impulses. Something was wrong; something bad was happening. She made a small sound of distress, as the dogs sprang on the old bull.

He put up a spirited defense, whirling, stamping, swatting at the dogs, but he was too slow. Streams of blood began to trickle down his torn legs.

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The lioness saw that it was only a matter of time before one of the dogs would bite deep enough to hamstring the bull, and then it would be over.

The dogs drew back for a moment, just to savor the taste of the impending kill, and the old bull looked at the lioness.

She saw some pitiful message in those tiny bright eyes, and, though she could not read it, the message drew forth the last bit of humanity that she possessed.

She exploded from her lurk, landing in the midst of the dogs before they knew she was there. She lashed out, broke the neck of one skinny piebald bitch, disemboweled another dog with a rake of her claws. The rest fled, shrieking disappointment and outrage.

She was alone with the bull. He made meaningless sounds at her. She shook her head, and growled softly.

After a while he turned away and shuffled slowly back the way he had come.

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She followed, just out of sight, until he reached the border of the world, and she watched as he passed out of the world. She could follow no farther. But just before he went away, he looked back into the world and smiled at her, a strange thing for an elephant to do.

The image of the thin-faced man with the gentle eyes was gone, and it never returned to trouble her.

The lioness hunted the steel Serengeti for many seasons after. She was strong enough to choose her own mate, a big deep-chested male with a wild black mane.

Once, when her cubs were still small, a hyena approached her. He made strange gestures at her, and babbled in the foolish hyena way. Oddly, he didn't try to do her or her cubs any harm.

After a while she chased him away, and she never saw him again.

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F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 50

In the February issue, we asked you to send SF stories of exactly 50 words. This one proved very popular, with many hundreds of fine entries.

Once again, thanks to Britain's Brian Aldiss and Sunday Telegraph for pioneering the idea of mini-sagas.

FIRST PRIZE

The near future; a bleak amalgam of global information networks, designer bioactives, and blurred boundaries between men and machines. Gib, hip mercenary in the endless corporate wars fought across the meaningless borders of withered nations, discovers the ultimate secret in an abandoned orbital factory — omnipotent, malevolent shades living in mirrors.

— William J. Raffetto
Moraga, CA

SECOND PRIZE

"Howdy do. Are you my grandfather?" BANG. Funny — I'm still here. "Howdy do. Father?" BANG. Now wait a minute . . . oh, I see. "Howdy do, Mother." BANG.

But — still here? No mother — no father — so how? How? Paradox conquered — but . . .

At last I see. I'll be a son of a gun.

— Laurence M. Janifer
New York

RUNNERS UP

THE CHROMOSOME FUTURE

Fearing senility, Don had himself frozen, anticipating a cure. Upon waking, he was told his mind's soundness was assured. Don rejoiced. "However," said his revivers, "cryonics has damaged your genes. You can't father boys, only girls." Don despaired. He realized he was to be a daughtering old man after all.

THE FATAL COLON

Mark suffered from debilitating diarrhea and entered an alternate universe seeking relief but accidently found himself in a world without punctuation where he was forced to speak and think without pauses or inflections and managed admirably until he wearied and faltered and inadvertantly returned to his own universe like this:

— Mario Milosevic
White Salmon, WA

Twenty years passed before we all met again. The problem had worsened. The consensus remained for the only solution we knew. We were sad, and would be sad for generations. Finally, we would ally with the whales and our dolphin cousins, and put our rabid little human pets to sleep.

— John Kilpatrick
Columbia, SC

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HONORABLE MENTIONS

Edgerly broke into the boarded-up, musty attic of his new home. Inside, a wooden-framed mirror engraved with, "YOUR FUTURE."

Clearing the dust, Edgerly saw his reflection . . . mad with insanity. Running from the house, he screamed.

His mental anguish began. Edgerly never knew if it was real or reactionary.

— Jeffrey Lyons
Laconia, NH

Obstreperous sensuously fondled captive Mamilla's pendulous adornments, gloating. Striving mightily, Thorax heaved free, skewering oligarch and minions, escaping with bride and booty. Evil heir's pursuit ensues. Charms, portents, and wizard divert to Quest for potent Talisman, True Ruler's sigil. Mamilla encumbered, Thorax prevails, eliminating horrendous foes, winning all. As usual.

Past Saturn, Gefloopman's black hole escapes, on course for Earth! Disaster looms, panic's depicted in vivid prose. Alone, Jimmy-Stewart-clone Smith hastily rigs a macropolysyllabic transmogrifier - will it work? Almost. Random side effects of near collision wreak havoc on fifteen assorted individuals' environments, in gory detail. Millions perish, yet Earth abides.

— Miki Magyar
Boulder, CO

War, pollution, greenhouse baked planet dry. Nearest other planet, opposite extreme: Ice Age. Crash program got spacecraft off hot world, onto cold. Craft crashed; likewise computer, wiping memory of civilization. Sole survivors, Adam, Eve, interbred with Neanderthals, told lost Eden story. This hack SF pulp plot nevertheless proves history circular.

— Paul Carter

"Dammit Joe, this isn't your decision to make."

"I got a gun in my hands says it is. He'll destroy everyone if we let him live. We kill him, we save earth."

He fired his rifle at the unarmed alien, leaving the flesh to rot. The virus began its infestation.

— Lynn Bowen
Sunnyvale, CA

COMPETITION 51 (Suggested by Damon Knight)

Send us up to a dozen anagrams of famous sf writers, e.g.:

All My Heresy (Mary Shelley)
A Mosaic Visa (Isaac Asimov)
O Norse Upland! (Poul Anderson)
Hail, Lone Snarl (Harlan Ellison)
Farce of Ginger Gelee (George Alec Effinger)

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by June 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, eight different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks, Runners-up will receive one-year subscription to F&SF. Results of Competition 51 will appear in the October Issue.

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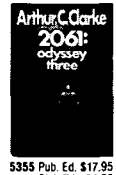

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